

After the holocaust...
a haunting fantasy

THE SINGING TREE

Brian Parvin



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For the family,
as always

' . . . and after the green lands of a thousand years there came the sullen Men of destruction who vowed their destinies in death and left nothing of their dreams. And this, my friends, was the time of the Great Death when Burning Air reduced this earth to all you see in sand and stone and bone. So it has been foretold that there are those who will journey to begin again and seek the single source of that which is life in fields and streams and woods; and at its centre shall be their fount of faith in our Kingdom. And this shall be their own, The Singing Tree.'

As told by the Dog Fox, Wasden.

One

The dog fox came slowly, like a thin shadow in late light, padding from the dusty field to the outcrop of trees without a sound. The air was already cooler with the onset of dusk, but the earth was still warm and almost golden in the sunset. In an hour it would be completely dark and the long night of the autumn surround him – an empty night, he thought, reaching the trees, and probably a hungry one.

Chalon stopped, his right forepaw raised, lifted his head and nosed the air carefully. There were no scents save those of the emptiness of dead wood, dust and, more distantly, rotting growth where a rainwater pool had not blistered in the heat. Nor were there any sounds; no dash in panic. The silence haunted. He waited a moment, nosed again, lowered the paw and bit angrily at the irritation on his flank. His coat had long since lost its lustre and tightened to a matting of stiff, lifeless spikes. He was thinner too, so that his bones protruded like slivers of rock, and now the strength and power of his limbs was ebbing. If he survived the autumn he would be lucky; if he lived through the coming winter it would be a miracle. The irritation subsided and he lifted his head again, his pale, watery eyes glazed by the light, and listened, senses tuned for the slightest sound, the merest movement. But there was nothing, only a whisper of the northerly breeze that would carry the cold of the darkness.

He padded on, quickening his pace as he weaved silently

between the empty trees and over the broken arms of fallen branches, moving deeper into the outcrop where the light had already faded. Here perhaps there would be the chance of a killing; a marooned bird, an injured animal, a slithering of the few worms that might be found by the rainwater pool. At worst, the pickings of the last leaves or a strand of weed. There would be something, of that he was certain, for the day had been cruel and miserable enough; the night could only be better. And once into the deepest part of the outcrop he would rest, find shelter between the flotsam of timber and sleep until the moon rode high and the stars were bright. Then, when the air crackled with a smear of early frost and his senses were at their keenest, he would hunt as he had as a youngster, bristling with anticipation, missing nothing, seeking out the challenge wherever it so much as moved or murmured. It would be like the old days . . .

He began the slow descent of a slope, treading delicately where rivulets of soft sand broke beneath his paws, his forelegs braced against the increasing steepness. Below him there seemed only caverns of darkness, thick brooding strips of shadows. An airless place, he thought, but well hidden and a natural trap for those weaker than himself who might well wander here to die.

He came to a halt at a straggling of dead tree roots and nosed the air. Was he mistaken or was that . . . He nosed again, a third time. It was a scent, faint but sufficient for him to be sure that somewhere far below him there was an animal. It was not moving, but neither was it dead.

A trickle of saliva broke from his jaws and for the first time that day the blood pulsed through his body. Tired limbs tensed with a new energy and his eyes darkened in the concentration of his stare. He could see nothing, not even the way ahead, for here the slope gave way to a sheer drop to whatever lay below. Once down there he might never find a path out. Perhaps it was a crater – one of the

hundreds that littered the landscape these days – from which there was usually no escape and only the company of bones. But there was the promise of food.

He nosed again, certain now that the scent was stronger; certain that it lay within reach. His right paw lifted, moved forward and felt for new ground, but there was only emptiness. His body shifted, inches to the left, inches to the right. Disturbed sand cascaded between his legs, falling out of sight to silence. He began instinctively to pant, excited by the scent, the prospect, the challenge until, unable to resist the urge to satisfy his hunger, he moved deliberately forward – and spun headlong into space.

In one moment he was spinning, in the next falling like a tossed boulder deeper into darkness. Putrid air rushed at his nostrils, half-choking him, searing his eyes, lifting the spiky ends of his coat until it seemed the very roots of his fur would be plucked from the flesh. And then, with a suddenness that forced almost the last breath from his body, he thudded to the ground and slithered, legs spread-eagled, to within a whisker of a shape which simply twitched, shivered and sweated, but offered no resistance.

He came violently to all-fours, already sensing the succulency of meat, the warmth of living tissue between his teeth, eager now to pounce and kill. But he hesitated, waited no more than the three seconds it took for the body to lift its head, for an eye to glare at him and be recognised. His prey, so nearly his meal, was a young vixen, pure white and, even in the closing clutch of death, delicately beautiful.

Chalon stepped back, ears flattened, legs stiff, his lips curled in a low, rumbling growl, his thoughts chaotic in the pain of his hunger, the shock of the fall, his surprise at the sight before him. The vixen did not move. Her head fell to the ground again and her young slender body heaved in a deep sigh of resignation. Death was tightening. Her mouth

opened and she tried hard to swallow her own saliva, but felt only the pinch of sand on her parched tongue and could find no strength to lift her head again to the fox above her. If he too was hungry and moved in for the kill, then so be it. The end would be quick. But there was neither lunge nor attack and now even the dog fox's snarl had died. She could feel only the soft wetness of a nose nuzzling at her flank, then her belly, neck and finally her jowl with its sharp protrusion of bone; a closeness of flesh that was at once frightening, yet peaceful. Her eyes closed and she began to drift into sleep . . .



Chalon's hunger pain had subsided in the curiosity of his discovery. He licked the vixen's head, but there was no response, then moved slowly round her, nudging her neck, her back, sensing the slender grip on life, watching for the slightest flicker of anger or resistance. But she was too far gone for there to be any greater effort than the fight to breathe. He padded round her again until he was face on to

her and stared into a half-closed eye. He could see that it was black – as black as the night above him – and that the fur, strafed and bedraggled though it was, gleamed incredibly white, sparkling in those few areas where the ravages of whatever had befallen the vixen had not taken their toll.

There was no doubt she was a Whiteface, far from her northern home, but a Whiteface for all that. How on earth had she come to stray this far south, and why alone? Nothing of the Whitefaces had been seen in these regions for Seasons, and such was the disgust and hate in which they were held that even the strays stayed no longer than forced before making their way northwards again. There were no whitefaces this side of the High Peaks – and none welcome. Yet here, in this outcrop of dead trees, in a sand crater, one lay dying. Why? Who was she; was she alone, or were there others close by? He raised his head instinctively as though to catch a sound of their movement, but there was still only the crowding whispers of the night breeze. He stared at the vixen again. She needed food and needed it now, but there was none here nor hope of it in such a death hole.

Chalon turned from her and padded round the crater, nosing at the smooth sheerness of the sides, despairing at every yard at the lack of so much as the slenderest rock hold by which he might scramble to the rim. His padding quickened, his anxiety deepening and the first shiver of fear beginning to tremble in his flanks. He too might be a prisoner here, condemned to die at the side of the vixen. And yet . . . There had to be a way.

He reached the far side of the crater and padded into deep sand. Here there was no rock – none that his paws could feel – only a steady shelving of sand that reached high into the darkness. He tried to pad over it, but sank to his chest; tried again, and sank still deeper. But the side was neither sheer nor smooth. If he could find a way of crossing it, he could reach the rim. And once beyond it and into the

outcrop there would be food, however meagre. He went back to the vixen, nuzzled her flank but aroused no response – yet there was no coldness to her. She held to life by the thinnest of strands and would not let go. Chalon's legs stiffened and his body tensed. There was only one way to reach the rim.

He shook himself, flattened his ears and leaped forward as though launching into an attack. His body, groaning with pain and effort, streaked ahead in a direct line to the sand shelf, gathering speed and momentum until, inches before the slope, he summoned every ounce of his failing strength and jumped, long and straight and sure like an arrow curving to the sky. He could not see the rim or sense how high above him it might be. There were only the first stars to be seen, but they were his guide as he rushed higher, his legs and body stretched in one gigantic streak of fur. Then he felt sand, at first lightly, almost tickling his paws, then closer, tighter, until he could feel its rippling surface. He was not going to make it.

His forelegs shot forward again and instantly felt the firmness of rock. His claws scratched, scrambled for a hold, gripped and in the leverage carried his hindlegs beneath him and up into his chin, his body curling to a ball in the tentative hold. But hold he did for the seconds it took in the last heave to bring him from the crater to the outcrop in a slithering, sweating heap. He scrambled to all-fours then padded into the deeper darkness of the trees, his nose already alive to whatever the dead land could offer.

Later, when the moon had floated high into the night sky, Chalon returned to the crater and carried the rewards of his long hunt to the vixen. His sharp teeth broke the flesh of the mouse and, as it bled, he nosed it gently to her mouth. She did not eat, but her head moved and her eyes opened. Chalon watched her lick at the flesh, then lay down at her side and eased the warmth of his body to hers.

The Whiteface might yet survive the night, he thought, burying his hunger and weariness in sleep.

Two

The first brightness of dawn was no more than a crease in the flat eastern sky. The night cold still lingered and the air moved on the gentlest of breezes. Morning would break fresh and cool, thought Chalon, as he stirred at the vixen's side.

He waited to see if she stirred with him, but her body did not move. There was only the slow lift and fall of her belly where, in sheer defiance of death, she continued to breathe. She had remained much the same throughout the night, content and consoled in the closeness of Chalon. Once, when he had felt himself slipping into a deeper sleep, she had lifted her head, her eyes had opened and for a moment it seemed she remembered and could sense danger, but the effort of movement had been too much and she had slumped back to a half-conscious state, neither dead nor alive. Yet she must at some time have stirred without Chalon knowing, for the blood of the dead mouse had been licked clean from the stones at her head and some morsels of the flesh eaten. There must, he thought, have been a flicker of determination, some thrust of will which had given her the strength to rally. But now she simply slept – or was she closer to death?

Chalon's hindlegs pushed at the ground and he eased his body away from her. It was time to explore the crater again, to discover where, if at all, there was hope of escape; some way or means by which he could reach the outcrop and,

more importantly, some way he could find to drag the vixen with him to water. If she did not drink soon and had not done so by the time the sun was high, she would surely die.

He padded round her, seeing her for the first time in the light of day. She was very young and, even allowing for the ordeal of her hunger, as slim as a sapling. But her fur and the density of her coat were as calm and soft as snow. This, he decided, was no ordinary Whiteface. There seemed none of the viciousness about her, the meanness of mouth by which the breed had become known in the Seasons since their first appearance after the Great Death. Chalon knew well enough the story of the Whitefaces' coming, of how they had appeared in the High Peaks as a strange mutation, a hideous consequence of the Burning Air that had followed the Great Death; of how, in less than three Seasons, they had become a breed of pure white foxes, outlawed by their common kind and forced higher into the peaks where they lived among the rocks and caverns of a desolate land.

They had survived by far more than stealth and cunning; theirs had been survival in a crusade of hate, of fighting all the odds of cold, wasteland and desolation with distrust, suspicion and, when it came to hunting, with ruthless killing that spared nothing. It was said that even the few Men – those still alive in their outposts of retreat – who ventured to the High Peaks held the Whitefaces in fear and would journey miles around them rather than face their anger. But this vixen, so soft and white and still, could not be one of such a breed, thought Chalon, yet such thoughts did nothing to explain why she was here or why, as he now felt certain, she was alone.

He turned from her, resisting the scraps of mouse at her mouth, and wandered away to where the light was already brightening on the crater's sides. He followed much the same path as he had in the darkness and discovered much

the same hopelessness of escape. The sides were smooth, sheer and daunting. No effort, however determined, would master them. He came to the sand slope again. Here there was a chance, but only he could take it. He might muster the strength for another leap; he might well reach the crater's rim and find food in the outcrop, but the vixen would remain where she was. There was no possibility of her summoning the strength for such a leap, not for many days, by which time it would be too late.

He padded into the sand, his paws sensing for a hold, some grip by which he might begin to climb. There was rock, but how far did it stretch and did it grow sheer farther on? He began to dig, scraping the sand away with his forepaws until he had cleared an area around him. Rock – grey, flat and smooth, but not sheer. He dug and scraped again, this time moving higher and deeper into the sand. The surface beneath him remained constant. There was no sudden climb, only a steady shelving. He continued to dig, the effort grinding at his muscles and bringing a return of the sharp pains of hunger and a longing for water – but he was making progress. The sand fell away and slowly, foot by foot, a pathway was cleared. The rock surface began to shelve, but it was a gentle lift. He tensed with excitement. This was the way!

And it had to be, for now he was aware of the first sounds of the day; the long swish of air and haunting flap of wings as hawks began to gather above him, gliding like black bands along the crater's edge. Soon, when their own hunger became too strong, they would swoop and leave nothing save the bones of those who could not hide from their talons.

Chalon dug on.

He worked until the shadows had slid from the crater floor and the rock faces gleamed in the new heat. Only once did he stop – to gaze at the hawks skimming ever lower to the

crater's rim, and then at the vixen who still had not moved. Her panting had deepened with the warmth, however, and this encouraged Chalon, for it showed she could respond and was aware of the changing temperature. If she could be moved, persuaded to eat and sate her thirst, then there was hope. But first he had to get her to the path he had cleared – and quickly before the hawks swooped lower and decided that the vixen would be easy meat.

Chalon padded back to her, nuzzled her neck and jowl and placed a paw lightly on her side. At first there was nothing save the breathing, the quickening lift and fall of her belly, then she opened her eyes, lifted her head and stared at him. Did she really see him, he wondered, or was she so dazed she saw only shapes she could neither identify nor understand? He nuzzled his nose to her face again, this time forcing her to raise her head higher, insisting that she keep a hold of whatever frail senses were pulsing through her body. She whined – the first noise he had heard her make – and tried to bring some life into her hindlegs. Her claws scraped fitfully on the rock, but could find no grip and simply slipped away in agonising helplessness.

Chalon nuzzled again, more forcefully, until he was able to feel the loose flesh at the back and side of her neck in his teeth. He took a hold, lightly, delicately but firmly, and then inched slowly back, dragging the vixen with him. She came easily, almost a dead weight, but conscious of the movement as her legs twitched and scrambled for some slight purchase on the ground around her. The effort deepened her panting and she began to froth at the mouth. It might all prove too demanding for her, thought Chalon, too great an effort, but she had to move, had somehow to reach the path.

Without looking up he could sense the presence of the circling hawks, watching his every movement, simply waiting their chance for his strength to give out and exhaustion force him to abandon the vixen and flee for his

own life. Then, like splinterings of black cloud, the hawks would swoop and feed crazily on whatever could not drag itself away from their talons.

He reached the edge of the rock slope and dragged the vixen on to it. Again he nuzzled and prodded her, willing her to find some last reserve of strength. Her head lifted and she stared about her. There was no recognition until she caught sight of the hawks, then she blinked and shuddered and began to claw at the rock path, fear overtaking weakness, forcing her limbs into action. Chalon responded instantly. He took hold of her neck again and pulled her farther along the path. The vixen's legs worked feverishly, whipping at the air like fronds. Her paws reached for a hold and heaved her body upwards. Now she was moving! Now they were both making headway. At first no more than a few feet higher, then yards, until the crater floor began to shrink from them and the rim come within their reach.

But the worst, yet supreme effort, was still to come. Would the vixen be able to make her own bid for the top? There was no way in which Chalon could physically push or hoist her to the rim. She would have to find that final strength within herself.

They reached the last of the path, their breath hot and fetid on the air, their bodies pulsating with effort, their tongues hanging loose. The vixen began to slump then slide, threatening at any moment to slip like sand back into the crater – but there was no failing of her senses as a hawk swooped low and hard at her head, its talons already primed for attack. The vixen tottered to all-fours and launched herself at the rim in a frenzy of fear. Her forepaws touched the edge but would have slid uselessly away from it had not Chalon bounded beneath her and heaved the weight of his body against hers, pushing her higher. There were seconds, ice-cold in tension, in which the vixen hung, scrambled, half-choked and fought for a hold; seconds when it seemed she must surely fall, when the bulk

of Chalon's back would crumble like dust beneath her.

And then she was gone from his sight – over the rim and rolling like a log away from the crater and across the sand to the shadows of the trees. Chalon followed, slithering from the death hole then turning and launching his body high on its hindlegs as the largest of the hawks dived for his head. Chalon bared his teeth, snapped and snarled and sent the hawk screaming into the sun.

He slithered on, out of the heat to the shadows where the vixen waited, her eyes already shining in the safety of the darkness.

Chalon hunted, the vixen slept; and later, when the sun was high above the distant peaks and had flooded the dry-dust fields with its sparkle, they feasted on a banquet of mouse, bird, insects and worms. They ate ravenously, engrossed in the taste, texture and sheer delight of food, picking over the bones and scraps until there was nothing save the stains of their meal on the sand and stone. And then, forcing herself to stand on trembling legs, but beginning to throb with the invigoration of new life, the vixen followed Chalon to the rainwater pool. They found what was left of the clear water, where the crust of stagnation had not yet formed, and drank until the tiny rivulets were almost dry.

Chalon was the first to move, padding into the cool of a patch of crumbling tree stumps and sprawling exhausted but contented in the shade. He would wait until dusk, he decided, before discovering why the Whiteface was so far south, who she was, where she had come from and where, now that death no longer stalked her, she was heading.

Three

Chalon braced his forelegs on the rock mound and nosed the keener air. Dusk had come early, creeping like a grey shroud across the landscape until there were no colours in the shapes of trees and the edge of the woodland to the south lay in stark silhouette. The day had worn to an end in sleep and rest and the pickings of food close to hand. Now it was time to move, to head either for the woodland or the more distant river where it meandered through the eastern lowlands, but he would not make his choice until the vixen joined him.

He turned his head and peered into the gloom of the outcrop. He had left the Whiteface cleaning herself, seated contentedly with her back to a rock while she washed the stragglings of her coat and gave it a new sheen. The rest and food had brought not only a fresher, brighter look to her body, but a renewal of her spirit, even though she had remained silent. He had caught her staring at him only once, but there had been no more than a soft whine from her when he faced her. Her eyes, dark and round and beginning to show something of their youth, had moved quickly away to stare beyond him – into space and whatever shapes of memories her thoughts were conjuring. But Chalon was in no hurry. She would come to him when she knew the time was right, when she felt ready either to leave for the High Peaks or go with him. He was happy to wait.

He nosed the air again. The first of the night cold was

returning, laced still deeper with the scent and sharpness of autumn. The days might be warm and the sun high, but the old Season was passing and the new gathering in the north. Soon the light would always be grey and the days harder. He would need to travel speedily and surely if he were to survive.

He was conscious of a movement behind him and turned sharply, ears erect and keen for its closeness; then relaxed as the vixen moved from the greyness, her eyes gleaming but gentle. Chalon waited.

'You are better?' he said.

'Much,' she replied, and padded closer.

'Well enough to travel?' asked Chalon.

'I think so.'

'Then we should go. There is nothing here. The water is finished and the food scarce. We should cross the plain.'

The vixen stared towards the shape of the woodland.

'Is that south?' she asked.

'South is to the trees, east to the river. There is only wasteland to the west, but your home is north – behind you.'

The vixen nosed the air at his side.

'There is no home to the north,' she said. 'The elders have fought among themselves and gone their ways. There is no home now in the High Peaks.'

Chalon eased himself to his haunches and did not shift his gaze from the vixen as she told of the day of the fight among the Whiteface elders; of the two largest dog foxes battling for supremacy, the younger finally killing the dog who had led for so long, but of how even with a new leader the youngsters had continued to fight, the older dogs quarrelled and the vixens turned against their kind, sometimes their own families, until days and nights had merged in a madness of destruction, and then of running.

She had travelled south with her two sisters through the lower reaches of the High Peaks and headed for the valley.

They had seen the twist of the river, their first sight of green growth and trees with leaves. Once there they could begin again, they had thought, hunting together, staying close, building a new home. But they had not reckoned on meeting the Men.

She thought there had been three, perhaps four, who had tracked them relentlessly. Her elder sister said it was the whiteness of their coats that carried the danger and that Men would use all their stealth and evil for such a prize, the more so when the Whitefaces were so young and in such small numbers. And so it had proved.

The Men had tracked them for three nights until, cornering them at the edge of the river, they had shot her sisters. She had managed by some miracle to escape, cross the river and wander aimlessly without food for. . . for how long? She could not remember. It had seemed like a whole Season. Then she had reached the outcrop, her senses deadened with pain and loss, and found herself trapped in the crater. Only then had it seemed her destiny must lie in death. But she had been wrong - her days were not yet over and a new Season would come.

'When you took me from the crater, I was crazed with wild thoughts and dreaming. I remembered the stories told by the elders when the days were calmer and there was a home in the High Peaks. The eldest would tell of what it had been like before the Great Death, of the Burning Air and sadness. But they also told of the lands to the south where new growth was showing and spoke of the forests that had returned to life. Do you know of these . . . of woods where there is grass in all the Seasons, food and fresh streams, and where, at the deepest centre of the thickest forest, there is a single tree, the tallest and most beautiful of all, from which this new life springs . . . the place they call The Singing Tree?' Her eyes gleamed. 'I vowed that if I lived I would journey there.'

Chalon felt a sudden chill, not of fear, not wholly because of the story the vixen had told of her flight from the High Peaks and the massacre on the riverbank, but because of what she had heard of the south and The Singing Tree. He too had listened to such stories as a cub. He could remember the nights of the winter Season when his father had returned to their den from the hunt and how he had settled in the darkness to tell of the south where new life – life as it had been lived long ago – was beginning.

His eyes had flashed in the promise and excitement of his words and delight in their telling, but there had been no suggestion of undertaking such a journey, no plan to reach the new green woodlands and find the tree, for no one was really sure where it was or if, in fact, it existed at all. The story had been told again and again, litter to litter, for a hundred Seasons, almost since the first spring following the Great Death. When the weather was at its worst, the hunting and warmth at their leanest, the story would be related to bring hope and renew belief. Yet no fox – none that Chalon had known – had ever travelled further south than the river. The south, its woodlands and its Singing Tree were a dream; a hope in loneliness, a promise in wasteland.

But perhaps there was something . . .

Had not Chalon's great-grandfather dog fox, the grey Wasden, told of how some believed it was written that the animal kingdom alone would survive the Great Death and discover new lands where there were no Men and the Seasons were at peace with growth; where there were green fields and pastures, copses, woodlands, dingles, streams, open spaces and the gentle roll of hills, and that there were those who would make such a journey – those, he had said, who sought an answer to its whereabouts and placed their faith in The Singing Tree's existence?

Chalon's vixen, Lamlett, had believed and urged that one day they should make such a journey in search of the

answers, but she had died two Seasons ago, leaving Chalon in his ageing weakness to remember only her words of faith. And now, here before him, was the White-face vixen. She did not necessarily believe, but she had heard and listened closely to all that had been said. Now she was homeless, her sisters dead; there was no future in a return to the High Peaks and no past from which she could shape a new life. Left alone she would either die at the hands of Men or remain forever an outcast, feared and hated for the whiteness of her coat. But would the south welcome her; were there mutations in the green fields and woodlands; was the new land a land for all, or did it guard its chosen few in some ritual of selection and rejection?

Chalon turned his head to the stiffening night air and felt its freshness at his nostrils.

'The south is far,' he began, 'many Seasons away. Perhaps four. But you are right, it is said among my own kind that there is a Singing Tree. As to the truth of it, I have no knowledge. To journey there would not be easy. There would be much land to cross, land I have never seen or know of. There would be dangers too – of a nature we cannot begin to imagine. It might be too much for me. I am much older. There is not the strength . . . '

The vixen came closer to him, her coat brushing lightly at his flanks.

'Not so old,' she said, 'and not so weak, either. Without your strength I would still be in the crater, bones beneath the hawks by now. And who was the one who found a way out? That was strength of a different kind – wisdom and understanding. We would need such thinking on the journey.'

Chalon nosed the air again.

'It is not simply a matter of journeying south,' he said. 'There has to be direction. You have to know and sense where you are going. Such questions are not easily answered.'

'But there are those who know?'

'I have heard it said there are, but where to find them or who they are, I have no idea.'

'We could ask.' The vixen came closer, nosing the air and then staring at him. 'Couldn't we?'

Chalon padded a few paces forward to the edge of the outcrop and stood with his head and shoulders craned to the night.

'The far woodland would be our first objective,' he said. 'It will take most of the night to reach it.'

They went silently and without looking back, the vixen padding softly at Chalon's side, her long, lean legs gaining in strength at the promise of the journey. Chalon's thoughts jostled for logic, in one moment dismissing the prospect of the venture as madness, in the next reasoning that tomorrow, the day after, the next Season, could not be spent searching out food in outcrops and craters. The Whiteface was young enough to be sure there was a future; he was old enough to have had a past. What lay between he could not foretell. He was conscious of nothing that made real sense save the drifting images of his youth, great-grandfather Wasden and the vixen, Lamlett. She had believed and had she lived would have begun this journey with him. Perhaps she was already at his side, moving in his moon-cast shadow like a guiding spirit.

He glanced quickly at the Whiteface, but said nothing.

Four

The movement had been there for more than a mile. Chalon had sensed it long before leading the vixen to rest and to drink at the pool among a scattering of rocks, but the shape was still too deep in the darkness for him to see it. There was no gleam of an eye, no flash of coat, no attempt to move closer, yet the sounds and smell were unmistakable.

The stoat had picked up their tracks soon after leaving the outcrop and followed ever since like a shadow, skirting the cover of the low rocks and sand dunes, watching, but always at a distance. Perhaps he was merely curious or fascinated by the steady, loping gait of the foxes heading for the woodland; or perhaps he was an early warning scout for a pack that lay much deeper in the trees. Perhaps he was one of half-a-dozen, or simply a stray too frightened to seek aid.

Chalon slowed his pace, waited for the vixen to come into step, and lowered his head as though to scent the way ahead. He primed his ears for sounds. At first nothing, then a slow slithering of sand far to his right. He half-turned his head, straining to catch the slightest shift of the blackness, some crack in its flatness that would confirm size and shape of the follower. He nosed quietly, sifting the air for scents of the unfamiliar, and caught the drift of stoat, but still only one and still out of sight.

He changed course, veering to the east, then twisted southwards again and quickened the pace. The vixen fol-

lowed obediently, never doubting his track, never questioning the change of direction. She was too intent on covering ground to be aware of anything save the journey and the route Chalon had chosen. So be it, he thought. He would say nothing to her of the stoat, who would either grow bored and move away on some other investigation, or close in. Whatever, the night was dry, the moon high and the woodland well within their reach by dawn. An invisible companion, however shy or secretive, was no hindrance. He urged the vixen forward at a fresher pace and settled contentedly to the journey that had begun well enough, but did not fail to catch the scurry in the sand that warned of the stoat still following.

A mile later they could sense the sharper lift and fall of the land as they passed from sand plain to rocks and then into the first stray growths of vegetation bordering the woodland. Chalon guided the vixen to a rift between the last of the rocks and halted. Ahead he could make out the darker depths of the wood where there seemed neither movement nor sound; to his left the ground sloped away in a steady descent to the eastern lowlands and the distant riverbed; to the west there was nothing save the sprawl of the plain to an horizon of night.

The moon had ridden high and bright in the blackness of the sky; stars twinkled generously and the air, though thin and chill, barely moved on the lightest of northerly breezes. Their breath hung in white veils, but that was the only movement – except for the stoat still tracking them.

Chalon listened and nosed the air in all directions.

‘There is the scent of stoat,’ said the vixen, coming to his side.

‘For many miles,’ said Chalon, still nosing. ‘You have only just sensed it?’

‘No, but I knew you had. There was no danger.’ Her eyes shone.

Chalon padded a few yards to the right and stared into the darkness.

'He's still out there, watching us,' he said.

'Perhaps he waits to see where we are heading. Perhaps he is lost.'

Chalon padded back to the vixen.

'Perhaps,' he said, and moved higher up the rift. 'We must keep moving.'

Chalon steadied the pace to an even trot, weaving delicately over the ground so that their pattern of progress rarely held to a straight line. If the stoat was intent on keeping them in sight he would be forced to vary his own run and might yet come into view. If, on the other hand, as Chalon now suspected, he was one of a pack lurking deeper in the woodland, he would break cover once they neared the trees and go on ahead to warn of the approach. Either way they should have a first sight of him soon.

They had moved through a denser outcrop of grass, broken branches and clinging vegetation and were within less than two hundred yards of the looser tree growth at the edge of the woodland when a sudden cracking of twigs ahead and to the right made them stop. Chalon sank down on all-fours, his belly easing to the ground with the softness of a feather. The vixen joined him, her ears flattened, her mouth tight.

The sounds died almost as instantly as they had cracked on the night, but neither Chalon nor the vixen moved. They waited, listening, watching, Chalon's head turning slowly as he nosed for a scent. To begin with there were only the night smells and the newer tangs of the woodland, then he caught the deeper scent of stoat – but more than one. There might be four, perhaps six, he thought, almost certainly males in a hunting party, and they were close, but not moving.

Did they plan an attack? It seemed foolhardy with so few numbers, but such was the desperation in the search for

food these days that the unlikely could never be deemed the impossible. A group of stoats intent on killing two foxes hardly had an advantage, but their ferocity would weigh heavily, particularly if they could call on the support of others. The vixen was in no condition or mood for a fight, and neither was he. Already he could feel the pangs of his own hunger and the efforts of the journey had taken a toll of the strength in his limbs. He needed rest, not battle.

He remained motionless, conscious now of the vixen's breath on his neck. She was beginning to pant with fear. He turned his head to her and stared intently into her eyes, willing her to silence. There was another sound, this time softer but closer and the scent of stoats intensified. Chalon bared his teeth and growled from the very pit of his stomach. Much as he wished to avoid a fight there was no merit in tacit surrender or any show of weakness.

Another sound behind him; another to the left. They were surrounded. Chalon eased himself to all-fours, his fur bristling. The vixen did not move. She would wait until Chalon took the line of attack.

The tangle of growth facing them began to move, parting like a gentle meander of flow against a rock, until he could see the gleam of two eyes then the darker shape and bulk of a head. But there was no sudden movement, no attempt to charge headlong into an attack. Chalon craned his head forward, his neck stiffening, limbs tensed for the thrust of retaliation should he need to move quickly. Another area of growth parted, then a third. Now the stoats' eyes gleamed like fires, each set fixing him as though to render him powerless in a trance. The vixen whined once, then growled, but still she lay at Chalon's side without movement. There had been a more confident sound at Chalon's back, confirming another parting of the growth, another pair of staring eyes. Now he could not only smell stoats but almost feel the closeness of their bodies, the poised paws, and hear the chattering of a hundred anxious teeth. If there

had to be a fight, it would be bloody and to the death, and he doubted . . .

'This is the country of Ghek. Who are you?'

Chalon had been totally unprepared for the sound of the voice much less the question. He had expected a cry of anger and hate from the stoats, perhaps a cacophony of their high-pitched screams in the first wave of attack, but not this – and certainly not the slow movement before him as one of the stoats broke cover and thrust his head and shoulders into view.

'Speak, fox, and identify!'

The vixen rose slowly on all-fours as Chalon began to speak, describing briefly their journey from the crater, across the plain to the woodland in the hope of travelling further south. He spoke quickly but carefully and with no hint of his surprise or mounting fear as still more stoats gathered round them.



The stoats listened, their eyes fixed like beams on Chalon and the vixen.

'And now,' concluded Chalon, 'we have come this far. We are tired and hungry. You have watched us, but we are, as you see, merely passing through.'

'Why south?' asked the stoats' spokesman, his body lifting in a display of heavy shoulders and rippling flanks. 'Few travel beyond the woodland. Few travel south. Fewer still know of it.'

'We seek . . . ' began the vixen, but fell silent as Chalon interrupted.

'There is no home for the Whiteface to the north. Her kind have fought and disbanded. The west is only a wasteland and the east holds no promise. To the south . . . '

'Passage to the south is by permission of Ghek,' snapped the stoat. 'Only Ghek will allow it.'

'Then may we speak with him?' asked Chalon.

The stoat hesitated, his eyes burning.

'You will follow without sound or haste,' he said. 'You will keep only to the track we lead. Should you run, we will follow and kill. Only Ghek can decide.'

The stoat turned sharply and plunged into the growth.

The others urged Chalon and the vixen forward, gathering tightly at their legs, but resisting any direct contact.

'Must we?' asked the vixen, quietly. 'Is it wise? We may never . . . '

'We have no choice,' said Chalon, and began to pad into the growth.

They went quickly and purposefully, hardly shifting from the almost direct line of track set by the leading stoat. They moved deeper into the trees on a steady descent, as though slipping into the very bowels of the earth. The darkness of the night was beginning to weaken in the filigree of branches high above them, but here on the woodland floor the gloom and chill still lingered. There was also a dampness and mustiness in the rotting vegetation,

yet evidence of some life, thought Chalon, and proof of a stronghold of survival, albeit controlled by the stoats.

He pondered on the name Ghek and tried to recall it being mentioned by the dog fox elders at their den gatherings. True, they had spoken often enough of stoats and of how they had been drawn together to hunt in packs after the Great Death, but there had been no specific mention of Ghek or of there being a single leader in the woodlands. In fact, it would be out of instinct for stoats to acknowledge a single force. Such was their reputation for violence, disagreement and conflict, even among themselves, that survival of a leader would be almost impossible. But times and conditions were always changing, he reflected, tiredly.

The vixen came lightly in his steps, her head forward, ears primed, but with eyes dulled and heavy in her disappointment. She could sense only more danger, thought Chalon, and perhaps had neither the strength nor the heart to face it.

They moved on for another half-mile, veering slightly to the west but continuing to descend on what had now become a slow and slippery shelving of sand and stone. The trees were taller and for the most part devoid of growth, pitted and gnarled with age and the ancient wounds of the Great Death. The dawn light, distant and grey in the far eastern skies, did not reach them. Night and darkness clung like an old cloak draped over the bones of a once proud forest.

The leading stoat brought the party to a halt and faced Chalon.

'Ghek will arrive,' he said, and turned his eyes skywards to where a fissure of early morning light began to pulse like a vein.

They waited, silent, motionless, gathered in a half-circle of bodies and bright eyes.

And waited . . .

'He comes!' shouted the stoat at last – and all eyes turned

higher to the shape moving from the light, through the tree-tops and down to the spread of a bark-shredded branch immediately above them.

The great buzzard perched, his beak and talons still blood-stained from a recent kill, opened his wings in an enclosing shadow and glared at the gathering.

'Ghek!' chorused the stoats. 'Ghek! Ghek!' they shouted until the sound echoed through the woodland in haunting adulation.

Five

There were long minutes when it seemed the shouting would never end; when the very earth and trees shook with the sound of the stoats' cries; when their eyes flashed and paws were lifted in homage to the buzzard perched above them.

Chalon and the vixen did not move – could not, surrounded as they were by the mass of bodies pressed in a creeping mound, edging closer to the silent, staring Ghek. But strangely, and for all the ominous threat of the bird – the blood-stained talons and beak, glaring golden eyes, bulk of the dark body – Chalon felt no fear. He neither trembled nor sensed any chill in the presence of Ghek. The buzzard did not reassure him, but neither did he feel the closeness of death. He simply gazed into the bird's eyes and waited – waited until the shouting had finally died and the stoats were still.

The leader of the pack crept forward to come within Ghek's shadow.

'We tracked them through the woodland,' he said anxiously, his shoulders cringing. 'They seek to travel south. But this, we know, is your country, Ghek. Only you . . .'

The buzzard screeched high and loud and lifted one foot in a clawing display of talons.

'I too have seen them from afar. They have travelled long. They must rest. See that they do. And when the sun

lingers, bring them to me at the Rock. Then we shall decide.'

Ghek stared at Chalon, held his gaze as though fixing it along a beam of light, then opened his wings and cruised effortlessly, silently upwards, soaring above the gathering and into the higher spread of the tree-heads like a vast black leaf. There were more shouts, more lifting of paws until the buzzard had circled them and wheeled eastwards towards the breaking dawn.

'Come,' said the stoat, turning to Chalon.

The stoats broke the half-circle and fell into formation behind their spokesman who hurried the party forward, moving at first deeper into the woodland then turning to the west and heading through a tangle of tree roots, brittle growth and dead grass. They began to descend, leaving the pale morning light behind as the tree roots formed a canopy above their heads. Soon they were enclosed by a wall of roots, twisted, mis-shapen, groping through the sand and stone like the mummified limbs of a million dead.

The vixen stayed close to Chalon, her nose nuzzling at his side, seeking reassurance and strength. He could sense the shivers in the flanks, see the fear welling in her eyes, but never once did she falter or raise so much as the softest growl when a stoat came too close or prodded her forward. While Chalon was near, she followed.

The tree root walls tightened then widened again as the party reached the shadowy darkness of a cavern, some extraordinary hollowness at the very core of a giant tree. Here the stoats stopped and gathered round Chalon and the vixen in a chattering mass.

'You will remain here,' said the spokesman, detaching himself from the others and placing his forepaws on a jutting ledge of stone. 'This is our meeting place, known only to ourselves and Ghek. You will not leave until we are ready. There will be food shortly, but for now you must do as Ghek says – you will rest.'

Chalon eased himself to his haunches.

'And then?' he asked quietly.

The stoat glared. 'That is not for me to say. That is Ghek's decision.'

'But shall we be allowed to travel on?' said Chalon.

'Ghek will know.'

'And how will he know?'

The stoat's body stiffened. 'He will know in the way Ghek knows everything – by what he sees from the sky. Only in his flight can anyone be sure of what lies ahead. Ghek sees – therefore Ghek knows. Ghek is master and protector.'

The stoat relaxed, trotted to the head of his party and led them back to the passage, into the darkness and out of Chalon's sight.

'Perhaps we should wait and then . . . ' began the vixen.

'No,' said Chalon, firmly.

'But if we stay here, who knows what may happen?'

'It is wiser to wait,' said Chalon. 'And better to rest,' he added, sinking his body to the sandy floor of the cavern. 'We have no strength for anything else.'

The vixen watched him for a moment, fretful and perhaps disappointed that Chalon had not resisted, or at least determined on escape at the first opportunity. There was a chance, albeit slender, that if they ran, found their way back along the passage to the woodland and kept running . . . But to where, she wondered? She knew in which direction lay the south, but had, neither the knowledge nor, she acknowledged, the strength to follow it alone. Without Chalon . . .

She saw that his eyes had closed and his breathing softened to a gentle lift and fall of the matted coat. He needed to rest, and so did she. She settled at his side, easing herself into his protective warmth, content that he was there.

Chalon watched but did not move or disturb the sleeping vixen when three stoats came silently into the cavern with six dead mice and placed them within his reach. He listened to the stoats' whispered chatter, eyed them carefully as they pointed and nodded among themselves, concentrating their attention on the vixen and the whiteness of her coat.

Perhaps they had never seen a Whiteface before, thought Chalon. In fact, it was highly unlikely that they had in a woodland so far south, but their curiosity did not explain their obvious admiration nor, he began to ponder, did any of the events of the morning explain why Ghek had not had himself and the vixen killed instantly. Such a prize of two foxes would indeed have been a feast. So why spare them; why insist on their resting and being fed, and why have them brought to the Rock, wherever and whatever that might be, at sunset? Was that to be the setting for a ritual slaughter? His eyes closed again, but still he did not move, conscious now of the stoats circling the vixen's body, their stares intent on her coat. He listened, catching every scrape of paw, every shift of sand.

'It is she,' he heard one of the stoats murmur. 'It has to be.'

'As Ghek foretold,' said another.

'Then it is so,' whispered a third. 'She has come at last.'

'As Ghek said.'

'As Ghek knew.'

And then the stoats slid away into the shadows, leaving Chalon bemused and uncertain in his drifting thoughts along the brink of sleep in the depths of the woodland cavern.

There were only half shadows in the sulky light of late afternoon when the stoats returned to the cavern to lead Chalon and the vixen back to the woodland. The air above ground was keener, delicately sweet, the sunlight stream-

ing in tight bands of yellow and blue-grey between the columns of trees, the sounds of the party's progress and the occasional flap of a disturbed bird muffled in the stillness. There might almost have been a mood of peace in the tranquillity but for the urgency of movement, the decisive crack of twigs as the leader stoat plunged ahead without thought or concern for what lay in his path.

Chalon and the vixen had no difficulty in keeping pace, however, and followed willingly. They had slept deeply, fed well on the mice and groomed themselves lightly but carefully before the arrival of the stoats. Chalon had said nothing to the vixen of the stoats' examination of her coat in her sleep, nor had he told of what he had heard. He did not understand its meaning and saw neither point nor opportunity in seeking explanations. It was enough that he and the vixen had survived and that the stoats were obeying Ghek's orders. His only thoughts now were of whatever fate awaited them at the Rock, but the fact that the food and rest had refreshed him and brought new strength to his limbs was an encouragement. If he had to fight then he would not submit without a battle.

The vixen stayed silent at his side, but there was a lightness in her step too, he noticed, a brighter, more assured awareness in her eyes and no shivering in her flanks. She had not resigned herself to death and would run with a fleetness far greater than that of the stoats should the need arise. Between them they might well . . .

The leader stoat had halted at what seemed the very fringe of the woodland where a curtain of tree stumps, broken branches and the dry skeletons of bracken rose high before them. Beyond it, flickering in the last of the sunlight, Chalon could make out a reach of stone, the promontories of grey rock and boulders. He stared skywards. The tree-tops had thinned to reveal smudges of evening cloud, and for the first time that day he could feel the soft touch of

a breeze, cooler and sharper, tinged with the creeping iciness of the closing Season.

'Halt!' snapped the stoat, and disappeared into a thicket of bracken.

The vixen nudged Chalon's flank. 'We could run now,' she whispered. 'We could reach the stone before they knew . . . ' But she fell silent again at the reappearance of the stoat and the sound of his snapping words.

'Ghek is here. He waits. Go!'

Chalon and the vixen padded into the trees, through the clinging bracken and on to the reach of stone where, immediately in front of them, was a single boulder, vast and pitted like the petrified muscle of some fallen giant, its upper level partly flattened to a platform. It was here, dark and foreboding, that Ghek perched, his eyes glinting, feathers hugging the light to them in sparkling streaks and jewelled droplets.

Chalon stiffened and waited.

Ghek eyed them – first Chalon and then, through a longer, deeper stare, the Whiteface vixen as though trying to pierce the sleekness of her coat and see into the flesh and bone beneath it.

'You have eaten, you have rested,' said Ghek, 'and now you are ready.'

But for what, wondered Chalon, the chill of the breeze sending a long shiver through his flanks. He felt the vixen lean against him. Did she plan to run; would she try to dash for the open ground of sand and stone beyond the boulder? If she did, it would be the last dash she would ever make. Nothing would escape the buzzard's eye or his swoop.

'We have done as you ordered,' said Chalon, motionless but tensed. 'We seek to travel south. We have no wish to linger here, but thank you for the food and chance to sleep.'

'And travel you shall,' said Ghek, lifting one foot in a menacing stretch of talons. 'It has been said that you shall.'

Chalon and the vixen stared in bewildered silence, their heads lifted to Ghek, their eyes fixed on his.

'It was said long before my time in the woodland,' the buzzard continued, craning his neck and lowering his head slightly. 'Said by those who survived the Great Death and the Burning Air. They knew you would come – and it has happened.' He fell silent for a moment, staring, flexing his talons. 'There will be a white one from the High Peaks who will travel south guided by her companion. That is as it was foretold. Do you know of this?'

'It cannot be,' said the vixen, quietly.

'Not so,' answered Ghek, 'but I doubt if you have ever been told of it. There are those among your kind who would wish to remain forever in the Peaks, who seek neither comfort nor hope in the new Seasons, who wish to remain outcasts and would kill to make it so, such is the measure of their hate. But you have escaped and reached this far. You must continue. You have found your companion. Your destiny is south, and there to seek and find The Singing Tree. Is that your quest?'

The vixen shivered. 'The elders spoke of such a place, those who did not fight. It is spoken of everywhere . . . everywhere they dream of The Singing Tree and the lands where there is a new beginning.'

'It is so,' said Ghek, 'there is a new land and a new beginning, but to reach it . . . that is not so easily achieved. And yet, you are the white one as was foretold.'

Chalon edged forward. 'Is this why we have been spared?' he asked.

Ghek released one wing in a wide, darkening stretch.

'When I knew of your progress to the woodland, I knew also that my duty lay in guiding you, as did the stoats who also know of what has been foretold and waited with me for your coming. The Seasons of our lives are as harsh as ever. There is always too little food, always too many battles and destruction, and always too much hate among those who

struggle for survival. But I believe in the south and The Singing Tree, though it is not my fate to travel there. I must remain in this woodland. This, and defence of the stoats, is my task and my destiny. But you are different. She is the white one my own kind said would come. I am to help as was taught by my elders.'

'Then we must begin,' said the vixen, beginning to pad lightly in a circle. 'There are great distances to cover, much to . . .'

'Wait!' said Ghek. 'I have watched the lands to the south for most of this day, watched and waited for the sights and sounds of danger. And they have come. Beyond this place, where the plain sweeps to the river, there are four White-faces – your own kind, vixen – who track you, I believe, in the hope of killing you. They have no wish to see you travel south or for your belief to be kindled in the effort. Their quest is the death of you.'



'Then we shall outrun them,' said the vixen.

'You may well,' said Ghek, 'you must certainly try. And then you must reach the river and there seek out the otter, Maychep – but remember the riverbank is black rat country. They too have only hate in their hearts. Steal by them, my friends, and do not linger until you find Maychep. He will guide you from there.' Ghek flexed his talons again. 'I shall watch you until you are beyond my territory. The skies are high and distances small from where I watch – but, understand, I can do no more than guide you in the direction of the river. Once beyond the stones and rocks, you must travel alone.' The buzzard moved higher up the platform until he was perched on the very tip of the boulder. 'South is ahead of you,' he called, 'and The Singing Tree in your hearts. Now go!'

He lifted in one enormous lunge, his wings opening like a sudden drenching of the night, and soared into the evening light, circling and calling to them. They watched him for a moment before padding from the edge of the woodland, across the stones and into the bleak, barren country that led to the river.

Chalon looked back only once, into the twinkling brightness of a hundred eyes in the bracken as the stoats watched them go, then he nosed the air fearfully, already searching for the first scents of the tracking Whiteface pack.

Six

In the first hour they went without stopping, loping lightly across the open sand and stone plain, their gazes intent on the smudged outline and lifting drift of the landscape to the south.

They travelled closely, their bodies as a single shadow cast from the glow of the setting sun, but they did not speak. The vixen made no mention of what Ghek had told them or of the lurking Whitefaces, and Chalon did not question her. Her eyes were still bright, but there was also the soft glaze of bewilderment. She did not doubt the purpose of their journey, he thought, but her role in it confused her. Who was she? Some chosen member of her kind, or some twist of fate that had brought her to the woodland with Chalon? How, he wondered, did she resolve being the subject of Ghek's upbringing and teaching with the cruel dangers that lay perhaps no more than the next step away? Who was she to believe that her destiny had been foretold, that she had been born to journey south, to find The Singing Tree, when already those who had bred and nurtured her followed with hate and death in their hearts?

The Whitefaces would kill her, of that Chalon was certain, and kill him too, but their reason for doing so was beyond him. The world into which he had been born, his early life at the den, his elders, the vixen Lamlett, had all been experienced within the single need for survival. Life

had always been the simplicity of hope, of moving into and out of each day content in renewal; that sleep came and waking was possible. He had not considered destiny as an experience, and the journey south and dream of The Singing Tree had been merely tales told when the Season's coldness huddled the elders together. To be some living part of such a journey and quest might have stirred in Lamlett's heart, but for him to suddenly find himself central to the most ancient of all that had been foretold overwhelmed him. He could not understand – and now, within his own heart, was fearful that he might ever do so. He was, after all, simply Chalon, the dog fox . . .

The western light was fading to grey by the time they reached a higher run of rocks. Ghek still circled above them, little more than a black speck against the dusky sky, but he had neither called nor swooped during their journey this far – a sure sign, thought Chalon, that the Whiteface pack had not closed in. There had been no scent of them and certainly no sounds. Perhaps they had turned westwards, or deeper south, or given up. No, they would not give up, not so soon. They would hunt through the night, seeking out a scent. Or would they, he wondered, wait for dawn and gather closer to the riverbank where they were certain to make contact? If so, then he would do well to lead the vixen into shelter, to find some dark place among the rocks where they might rest and sleep until the first streak of light. Then, if they were careful, silent and certain in their progress, they might reach the river before daybreak. The otter, Maychep, would be about early; the black rats might be sleeping; with luck the Whitefaces would be resting.

Chalon halted, stared about him and moved through a cut in the rocks. It would be wise to let the night have its way and bury them, he decided.

Chalon did not stir from where he lay with his back to the

rock face when the vixen padded from him and nosed at the night air beyond the crevice. He watched her as she lifted her head and stared at the moon. The cold breeze ruffled her white shining coat, but she seemed unaware of it. Her eyes were dark, her ears pricked and sensitive, her long legs supple and alive in the new energy that had recharged her body. She was indeed a beautiful Whiteface, he thought, but troubled now in her thoughts. What did she see in the roundness of the moon, he wondered, and of what did she dream? Of who she was, where she had come from, where she was going to; of the south, The Singing Tree? Was she afraid, or simply anxious? Chalon closed his eyes as the vixen turned and padded back to her place at his side, and stayed as silent and unmoving as the night itself through her fretful sleep. But it was some time before he slept again, for he could not be certain if she too had scented the Whiteface pack travelling steadily south.

They were far from the rocks by first light and could already smell the river by the time they reached the sand slopes leading to it. Dawn was still an hour away, perhaps more if the overnight cloud that had gathered did not disperse on the freshening winds from the north. Chalon sensed rain in the air – and welcomed the prospect. It would reduce the vision of those watching their progress and stifle the spirits of the adventurous, particularly the rats.

He glanced skywards as he padded a yard ahead of the vixen. The heavy darkness of the night had not fully cleared, but there was no mistaking the build-up of thick cloud. No mistaking the sharper chill, either. The change of Season crept closer, and behind the rain would be the whirling, wind-driven sleet storms, a time of hunger and fighting for survival. But who could know where they might be by then?

He turned his head to the vixen, then nosed to the east. She followed without a word. Silence and fleetness of foot

were their only concern, and so far, whether by stealth or good fortune, there had been neither sight nor scent of the Whitefaces. Had they reached the riverbank, wondered Chalon; were they already lying in wait for them, or had the fates been kinder and taken the pack on a course far to the west? There was no way of knowing and not even the guiding flight of Ghek to help. They were beyond his woodland territory and alone.

The first spots of rain had pitted the sand and the stronger wind begun to bend the heads of the reeds still some distance away when Chalon heard the first growl. It was low, muted, almost hollow on the back of the northerly wind, a sound that might easily have been mistaken for some quirk of the wind's rush – but not to Chalon's ears.

He stopped instantly, his head raised, ears pricked, eyes brightening.

'You heard that?' he said, as the vixen padded to his side.

'Yes,' she murmured.

They waited, tense and still. Another growl, this time closer.

'Whitefaces?' asked Chalon.

'Whitefaces,' said the vixen.

Chalon stared ahead. The line of the reed beds was no more than a brisk dash away. They might reach the cover unseen, or would the sudden movement alert the pack? Or were they already in their sights?

The rainfall sharpened, slanting across Chalon's face. The reed beds were their only choice, he decided. He moved away quickly, holding the pace to a lope until the vixen was level with him, then lengthened his stride, lowered his body and raced for the cover.

The wind shouted in their ears; the rain pierced their coats, pricking at their flesh like the bites of a fly storm. The sand beneath their paws collapsed; stones that a moment ago were of no concern were suddenly boulders intent on tripping them.

They raced on, the reed beds closing with every stride. Chalon had vowed not to look back, but could not resist a hurried glance at the sound of a rumbling growl. Sure enough the Whitefaces were in pursuit. He could see two, the vague outline of a third, and perhaps a fourth still further distant. The leader was already gaining on them, crossing the sand as though in flight, his paws barely touching the ground in the whipping momentum of his stride. They would never outpace him, never reach the reed beds before . . .

And then the sand, stone, shingle and reeds erupted with a violence that blinded. In one moment Chalon and the vixen were racing for their lives to the river, in the next slithering to the left as a hoard of black rats crashed from the reed beds, squealing and whirling before them in one enormous heaving mass. Trapped!

Chalon veered sharply, felt the vixen brush his side. His legs began to weaken, his breath clamoured in his chest. His ears rang with squeals and growls, but he raced on, the vixen close, her eyes burning with fear. Who would reach them first, he wondered, the Whitefaces or the rats?

The rat pack broke in confusion, twenty or thirty of them scrambling wildly for the four Whitefaces, six or eight turning their attention to Chalon and the vixen. There were seconds of hesitation as the leader of the Whitefaces thudded to a halt, when the rats in front of them came on like a tidal wave, when Chalon felt the first nip of teeth at his underbelly and saw the vixen slither in a twist of sand to the reeds.

Chalon rolled instantly, his legs riding high, his jaws snapping at the squealing black body fixed to his fur. His teeth sank into flesh, ripped at the rat and flung it high, only for it to be replaced by another, lunging red-eyed and crazed at Chalon's swirling brush. He growled, rolled again, shook the rat free and felt his shoulders sink under

the weight of a third attacker. This time the rat's teeth penetrated his fur, broke flesh and sent a geyser of blood spurting through the air. But there was no pain, none that brought Chalon to his back or forced him to slow the effort that tipped the rat from him and gave him the vital moments needed to flash his teeth across its face and bite clean through the rat's muzzle.

Chalon turned in a whirling frenzy, catching only a blurred sight of the Whitefaces locked in battle behind a wall of black bodies – but there was no sight of the vixen. He turned again, this time lowering his body to the ground until his flanks and throat were grovelling in the wet sand. The rain scudded across him on the mounting wind and for an instant he wanted to sink still deeper into the sand, to feel it enclose him, drag him beneath its surface into darkness . . .

He came alive again in time to see the largest of the rats close to make a desperate charge for his head, its teeth already bared, eyes glowing with what might have been fire in the head, claws fanned for a hold. Chalon did not move until he could almost smell the rat's breath, until its mouth was within an inch of him. He rose dragon-like, mouth open, snarled, bit and trembled with the sensation of flesh between his teeth. The rat fought in his mouth, squealing and writhing, every limb and tissue bidding for freedom, but Chalon's grip held. The teeth sank deeper . . . deeper. He crunched on bone, released his hold and backed defiantly into the reeds.

Three rats watched him go, their teeth chattering with hate, their bodies immobile in the panic of their own fear. Chalon saw and heard the Whitefaces still in battle, but continued to back, inch by careful inch, until only his head protruded from the reeds. Then he turned and ran, tumbling through the growth, the wound in his shoulder beginning to throb, blood bubbling from the gash.

Now he could smell the river and hear the beat of the rain

across its surface. He crashed violently to his right, regained his feet and felt the first soft squelch of mud beneath his paws. The vixen . . . where was the vixen?

He reached the flow, broad and grey, swirling in eddies between the rocks, and felt his eyes closing, his legs buckling, the pain eating into him. The vixen . . .

'Here! This way!'

Chalon lifted his head at the sound of the voice and saw the otter not five yards from him, its body as thick as a log between the columns of reeds.

'This way!'

And when Chalon moved, the pain reducing him to a three-legged lope, his heart thudded at the sight of the vixen close to the ground behind the otter, her white coat sodden but gleaming, her eyes anxious and urging him to her side.

Seven

There was darkness and warmth, the smell of bodies close by, the touch of sand and leaves beneath his fur – and silence. It was not complete, for somewhere far away he could hear the lap of water, but it was secure. There were no squeals, no growls, no cries of attack; here there was only gentleness and the peace of which he had dreamed in those days of family life in the den long, long ago. He yawned and stretched, thrusting his legs forward until they were straight and stiff. The pain in his shoulder still throbbed, but it no longer racked him, nor did he feel the thrust of hunger. His contentment lay for the moment in the silence and being at the edge of sleep where his eyes could close without concern and images of woodland and the vixen Lamlett pass before him in slow, misty driftings. There was no need to stir from such gentleness . . .

Chalon slept until the late afternoon, and the sun had almost gone before he nosed carefully at the brisker air beyond the otter's holt. The skies had cleared of the rain clouds and Maychep and the vixen were at their ease by the side of the river, their bodies relaxed and comfortable on the broken reeds beneath a shelving of rock. They turned at the sight and smell of him and the vixen's ears sharpened in happy alertness.

'So,' called the otter, 'you finally wake! And how do you feel?'

Chalon joined them and eased his body into the reeds. 'Still tired, I fear, but the pain is less and the weakness not so bad,' he said.

'Good,' said Maychep. 'You can count yourself fortunate to have such a faithful companion. She's tended your wound for most of the day.'

The vixen nuzzled at Chalon's neck.

'Thank you,' said Chalon. 'It must have been . . . ' but he dismissed the thoughts and stared anxiously around him. 'What of the Whiteface pack?'

'Oh, they're long gone,' said Maychep, cheerfully. 'At least, they're not here. They must have had quite a tussle with the rats and taken to their heels. I'd guess they're, oh, perhaps two, maybe three miles to the north. Well out of range, anyway.'

'But they'll be back,' said Chalon.

'Undoubtedly,' replied Maychep, 'but not tonight and not before you're on your way again.'

'Maychep has been very kind,' said the vixen. 'He says we can stay at the holt until morning and then he'll lead us . . . '

'Not so fast!' chuckled Maychep. 'Give your friend a chance. He's still half-asleep!'

'No – no, not at all,' said Chalon. 'I'm anxious to hear of your plans.'

'Well, I'd hardly call them plans,' said Maychep, rolling onto his back. 'It's more a case of strategy. Of course, I knew you were coming, or at least guessed there was something brewing when I saw old Ghek flying high and this far south. Not like him to spend quite so much time so high – so I deduced he was leading someone.' He stared intently at Chalon. 'Not that I could have imagined for a moment it would be anyone . . . well, quite so important. I refer, of course, to your friend. She is rather special, you know.'

'Yes,' said Chalon. 'I know.'

Maychep rolled onto his side again. 'It's years since there

was anyone here to tell the story. I don't get many visitors, in fact hardly any at all these days. There's the damn fool rats – mad and far from neighbourly – and Grope, the only water-vole for miles, but he keeps pretty much to himself, so all in all I rarely have the chance of meeting anyone who knows the story, much less who happens to be a part of it.'

'Story?' said Chalon.

'The south and The Singing Tree. It's a story – at least, that's how I think of it.'

'You don't believe it?' said Chalon.

'Oh, I didn't say that,' replied Maychep, 'not at all. I believe, but when I say *story* in that sense, I mean as it was told long ago when I was only a cub. They – being those who lived on the river in those days – used to tell the story in the winter, much the same as they did in your den, I've no doubt. I used to love to hear it. I always felt so, well, elated afterwards, as if there really was something worth living for. Know what I mean?'

'Yes, I do,' said Chalon.

'Of course, the Great Death was long before my time, but I did have a whiskery old uncle who could recall the early days after the Burning Air. He was quite a character. Very solemn, very precise, but very wise. It was he who first told me about the south and the Tree. He could tell the story as if he'd just returned from the place. There were fields, hedge-rows, wonderful hills and, needless to say, half-a-dozen rivers absolutely teeming with fish, and the woodlands – and then, at the centre of the deepest, The Singing Tree. Reach that, he used to say, and you have life.'

'Did he ever mention . . . ' began Chalon.

'Ah, now I knew you were going to ask that,' said Maychep. 'You were going to say, did he ever mention anything of the Whiteface vixen? He did, many times. According to him it had been said after the Great Death that there would be such a vixen who, with her companion, would travel south. There was something very special

about that, but I was never told precisely what, and, to be frank, I didn't really expect that part of the story to be true – not until today.' He glanced hurriedly at the vixen. 'I must say it's all, well, something of a shock, but a pleasant one for all that. I mean, it does restore one's faith to think that all those Seasons ago they knew, really *knew*, what would happen. Incredible.'

'And now you can help?' said Chalon.

'Most definitely. There's only myself of my kind hereabouts now. The others have died or drifted away one by one. There's really very little to hold them. The rats are a major problem, of course, but I'm used to them and know their stupid ways. But I've stayed out of growing old age and memories. This is my river – this part of it, anyway – and I like it. Home's home wherever you make it and want to stay. So, here I am, alone but content and, though I say it myself, not a bad guide when it comes to travelling south.'

'There have been others?' asked Chalon.

'Many,' said Maychep. 'There were two hares last Season. A dozen rabbits some time ago, three squirrels . . . Quite a list, in fact. Whether they reached their destination is another matter, of course.'

'What makes you say that?'

Maychep ran a paw over his whiskers. 'It's not an easy journey. I mean, I don't know what lies beyond here. I can only take you as far as the Plain and point you in the right direction – after that, well, it's anyone's guess. But it can't be easy. Nothing is these days, but to actually travel south *and* reach it – that must be something, always assuming you happen to know where south is. I don't. Do you?'

'Not really,' said Chalon.

'We shall know it when we are there,' said the vixen.

Chalon and Maychep stared at her.

'Very probably you will,' said Maychep, 'but there's still the journey.'

'And where do we begin?' asked Chalon.

'At the Plain, as I've said. I'll show you that tomorrow. Cross that and then you must seek out the badger, Briggan – and it goes without saying he's a very elusive character. I've no real idea where he lives or how you'll find him. All I do know is that he's out there, beyond the Plain.'

'And then?' asked the vixen.

'Who knows?' said Maychep. 'I certainly don't – does anyone? But I do know one thing: there's never been a traveller crossing this river who hasn't asked if the Whiteface vixen had already passed. Not one. So I assume everyone knows the story, or comes to hear of it, and given that and the fact that they ask the same question, you must be special. There has to be something about you and your coming, though damned if I can think of it.'

The three were silent for a moment, watching the slow glide of the river at their sides.

'And the Whitefaces,' said Chalon. 'They're a threat.'

'True,' said Maychep. 'It's obvious what they have in mind. And there's another thing: why do they want to hunt you down? They must be very afraid of something, or someone. No answer to that, of course, but I'm afraid they're going to be on your trail for some time. I doubt if they'll catch you at the crossing to the Plain. They won't know of it and I'll make certain we're not seen reaching it, but they'll scent you out before long and then make their own crossing. You must watch for them and certainly not waste any time.'

'This Plain . . . ' began Chalon.

'No more for now,' said Maychep, lifting the weight of his heavy chest on his forelegs. 'It's time to eat, enjoy the last of the day, and then rest.'

'What about the rats?' asked the vixen.

'They'll stay with the Whitefaces until they're bored or make a killing. They won't be back here for a day or so. They're like that – never content.' Maychep trundled to the river's edge. 'I'm for food,' he said. 'You'll find plenty to

suit your tastes hereabouts. Help yourselves.'

And with that he slid into the flow and from their sight.

The vixen nuzzled Chalon's neck.

'Are you very tired?' she asked.

'I'm feeling much better,' said Chalon. 'Thank you for . . . '

'I was glad I could help,' said the vixen. 'You fought well.'

They fell silent for a moment.

'Do you wish to continue the journey?' asked the vixen, staring into the flow.

'Yes,' said Chalon. 'Yes, I do. I want to because . . . ' but the thought drifted from him again when the vixen turned her gaze on him.

'Food,' she said. 'I'm hungry!'

There was little sleep that night. There were too many tales to be told, too many memories to be recalled and recounted, too many hopes and dreams to be exchanged, so that it was already breaking light when Maychep stirred from his bed in the holt and announced it was time to leave.

'Stay very close, stay silent and never lose sight of me,' he warned, as they slid into the early morning air.

There had been a light but tight frost, sufficient to whiten the reed stems and stiffen them to glistening spears, and for all their fleetness of foot neither Chalon nor Maychep could avoid crunching over the undergrowth in their path westwards. Only the vixen seemed to go in silence, the whiteness of her coat glinting against the smears of frost, merging her into the surroundings as though she were a moving part of them.

Maychep was in no hurry. He moved stealthily, stopping constantly to raise his head above the reeds and peer to left and right, then ahead, assuring himself that all was well and that they were still alone. Their track took them steadily westwards, at first hugging the river, skirting the



narrow bays and inlets, scuttling beneath fallen trees, trotting as carefully as they could over a bed of frosted leaves, then moving deep into reeds until their spiky tips were a lattice-work roof above their heads. The light was slow to strengthen and cast them into a half-gloom of shadows and sudden darknesses, then into lighter areas where morning shimmered on the river's surface and danced like diamonds on the flow's tremors and ripples. There were few sounds save those of a disturbed bird, a feeding fish and their own steps.

In an hour they had crossed the shingle shallows of the river at its narrowest point and started to move inland, away from the flow and beyond the reed beds to where the land slid away to patchy pasture, outcrops of stone and the stunted remains of a copse. Maychep quickened the pace, veering southerly towards what Chalon could already make out to be a more distant range of hills. Beyond them, he supposed, lay the Plain.

They stopped once at a remote pool where Maychep drank thirstily, urged his companions to do likewise, and began to feed on a cluster of snails among the stones.

'Food is going to be another problem for you,' he said. 'There's very little on the Plain, so I advise you to stock up now.'

They did so, joining in the hunt for snails, worms and taking their fill of whatever juicier pickings of vegetation were to be had.

'Time to move,' announced Maychep at last, staring eastwards to the horizon and lifting flare of the first sunlight.

Chalon and the vixen followed obediently as Maychep set off again, this time taking a direct line to the hills. It was some time before Chalon felt the land begin to rise and the effort of keeping up the pace bite at the muscles in his legs. The patches of pasture had been left behind and now their paws began to scramble in the first screes of stone and pebbles. The hillside was gentle, however, and rose without haste to open, barren heights. Maychep nosed the path ahead like an old warrior returning to the battleground. He knew every twist of the track, could avoid every loose scree as though by instinct and seemed to cover the ground and move higher almost without breathing.

The sun was fingering the horizon by the time they reached the top of the hill and Maychep led them into the shelter of a rock wall.

'Almost there,' he said. 'The track you will follow is to the west, but you can see the Plain from here. Take a look.'

Chalon and the vixen edged to the side of the rocks and stared long and hard and without a sound at the haunting scene below them. For a moment Chalon thought there was nothing to see, no spread of land, no stones, rocks, sand, trees, nothing save a hanging veil of yellow mist and a grey smudge of dirt beneath it. Then his eyes widened and accustomed themselves to the light. There was a surface beneath the mist, he decided, a flat emptiness, cracked and

splintered by what looked to be channels, black veins on wizened flesh, crossing and criss-crossing in a maze of intricacies like a gigantic cobweb. He nosed the air and sensed the acrid layer of . . . of what, he wondered? Death, decay? He felt the vixen shiver at his side and heard the slow steps of Maychep.

'Not quite what you expected, is it?' said Maychep.

'No,' said Chalon. 'But what on earth is it?'

'That,' began Maychep, 'is a dead lake bed and a still living area of the Burning Air. What you see as mist, my friends, is a death cloud. Move into that, so much as lift a nose to it, and you're dead. Don't ask me what it is, because I can't tell you. All I know is that it's been there since the Great Death. But there is a way through. You see the channels? They are deep enough to keep you below the surface, so what you must do is enter them – any one of them – and work your way steadily southwards. It's a maze, but it can be beaten. But remember, if you move out of the channels . . . ' His whiskers twitched. 'Still want to make the journey?'

Chalon was silent for a moment, staring, wondering, already feeling the fur on his flanks begin to prickle in his hesitation and growing fear.

'I . . . ' he began.

'If there is a way through, we will find it,' said the vixen.

'Very well,' said Maychep. 'I can only wish you well from here. Take the track to the west, move carefully towards the Plain and be sure to keep below the cloud.'

'Is there anything living down there?' asked Chalon.

'I have no idea,' said Maychep. 'To be honest, I've never met anyone who's made the journey.'

'Some have?' said Chalon.

'Many have certainly tried.'

Chalon shuddered. 'And there is no other way?'

'None,' said Maychep.

The vixen nuzzled at Chalon's ear.

'We should be going before the Whitefaces catch up,' she said.

'Yes – yes, we must,' replied Chalon.

Maychep lifted his head and squatted on his haunches.

'May I . . . ' He paused. 'You will understand what I mean when I say my thoughts will be with you, and that I shall listen on the wind of the river for news of your safe arrival.' He turned and began to trot away, then halted and faced them again. 'There is a Singing Tree,' he said. 'I'm sure of that now.'

And then he was gone, a sudden shadow swallowed in the morning light.

Eight

Daylight was no more once they had descended the hillside and come to within a yard of the edge of the Plain. Where there had been light in the glow of the morning sun there was now only the yellow murk of the cloud, flat and still in lifeless layers. Where the air had been fresh and keen with the sharpness of frost there was now a sultry, cloying atmosphere in which breathing became an effort and sudden movement almost impossible. They had padded softly, carefully over the scree slope, fearful that so much as a disturbed pebble might create its own danger, descending on the very tips of their paws, legs shivering in the momentum and determination of moving slowly and silently. Ahead of them the grey lake bed and myriad weaving of its channels grew in size and threat like a fevered dream. It might be the images of nightmare, thought Chalon, resisting the temptation to stop and stare, moving ever downwards, the vixen at his side, as close as a shadow.

They stayed silent until they stood facing the openings to four channels, each dark and narrow, disappearing deeper into the Plain behind the motionless curtain of cloud.

'Which one?' asked the vixen. 'How can we tell which one?'

'We can't,' said Chalon, easing a step ahead of her and nosing the air. 'There is no scent, no sound and nothing to see. If only we knew what lay beyond. Is there life here? How can we be sure . . .'

'The third opening,' said the vixen suddenly. 'It has to be that one.'

'What makes you so certain?' asked Chalon.

'I know – I just know,' she said, and trotted forward.

'Wait!' said Chalon. 'I'll lead. Stay behind me, but should you lose sight of me remain exactly where you are. Don't move. Understand?'

'Yes, I understand.'

Chalon nosed again, but still there was no more than the acrid smell of burning. He stared hard at the third opening. It looked no different from the others; black and thin, its walls perhaps three fox bodies high – high enough to protect them from the cloud, but too low to give them manoeuvrability in the face of danger. Danger, he wondered? What danger could there be? Could anything actually *live* there, trapped in a channel beneath a death cloud?

He lowered his gaze to the surface of the channel. It seemed to consist of pebbles and red sand. There were no strays of driftwood, no sticks of broken twig, no hint of growth of any kind – but, more important, there were no signs of paw prints, not so much as the scrapings of a claw mark. His heart lifted. Perhaps their journey would be a safe one, after all. It might take a day to cross the Plain, but if they kept moving, and could do so unmolested, they might well hunt by moonlight in the country beyond.

'Follow me,' he said, and padded into the channel.

If it had been possible to move from day to night in a single step, then they had done so; if there was a light by which you could be guided into death, they had found it, thought Chalon. The half-world of the channel was unreal, neither living nor dead, yet he could see a way ahead, no more than a body's length, but sufficient for him to be sure they held to their southerly course and did not veer from a straight line. To left and right, sometimes at intervals of no more than a few steps, there were other channels, equally

narrow, equally dark, leading into other worlds. Or was it the same world?

The channel they had chosen ran true and for an instant Chalon imagined the vixen's choice had been providence, for there seemed nothing in those first minutes of their progress to indicate they would not cross the Plain in a direct line. Then the track began to turn, at first gently to the east, more sharply to the west, back to the east again, until it ended without warning at a junction, with channels running to both east and west.

Chalon stopped and nosed the air of both. He turned to the vixen.

'Your choice,' he said.

The vixen stared for a moment, her eyes gleaming like black stars. 'To the east,' she said.

Chalon moved off without question, assured in his own thoughts that she must be right, for there were no choices in such a place.

The channel was slightly narrower than the one they had left, and now the surface began to change from pebble and sand to what felt and sounded like the splinterings of millions of marooned shells. Here too there were small rocks and the walls of the channel were smoother, damper, as though brushed by the drift of a light rain. But the air was no less acrid and the ceiling of cloud just as menacing, lurking but not moving like a grey face above them.

Chalon's pace had slowed and now he began to nose the surroundings more frequently, searching for the slightest scent of the unfamiliar. For a moment he thought he detected the stench of something rotting, then of vegetation – leaves, or grass or reed – but neither strengthened and were soon lost on the acrid air. The channel widened again, this time to reveal walls that were sparkingly damp and dripping with slow trickles of brown water. Was it drinkable, wondered Chalon, tempted to sate his growing thirst? He dismissed the possibility and padded on, but

did not fail to catch the streaks of lichen that reached in skeletal tendrils along the channel walls. Growth – which meant life.

His eyes ached in the concentration of peering ahead, but now, he decided, there was perhaps something to seek out; some movement, the first outline of a shape. The lichen growth grew, thickening and spreading until it reached almost to the top of the channel walls, falling short of the rim where the cloud shut out the light and dissipated the living. He nosed more intently, but still there was nothing to disturb him, not even the scent of the following Whitefaces, he noted thankfully. Perhaps they had not shaken off the black rats, or been diverted. Perhaps the wily Maychep had distracted their attention; or perhaps . . .

His thoughts had wandered for no more than seconds; his concentration lapsed for less than twenty paces when the vixen called out from behind him.

‘Ahead!’

He heard her slither into panic, could sense the sudden heat of her breath, then the thud of her body at his side as she drove him against the wall.

The sound when he finally heard it was no more than a few feet away; the shape when it grew in the gloom the reality of nightmare.

They did not move. Chalon’s fur bristled, lifting from his flesh in stiff, twitching spikes. His eyes flashed, his ears flattened. The vixen froze to stone at his side, her legs straight and tense to paws that gripped the ground. And they stared, hardly daring to so much as breathe, at the coiled adder before them.

The snake’s eyes had already fixed with a penetration that burned, its sight like an aura of light about the gently swaying head. It was black and, for its species, considerably larger and thicker than any Chalon had encountered,

so much so that the coils blocked the channel, resting like whirls of sweating limbs across its width. To move forward would be impossible, to attempt a retreat equally deadly should the snake decide to lunge. A single movement – in panic, in stealth, by design or by accident – would be enough to unleash the lightning-strength of the adder and prompt the bite that would sting, then numb and finally end in their deaths.

The vixen shivered along her flanks, but held her ground. Her head moved a fraction closer to Chalon.

‘What . . . ’ she began in a murmur of breath.

‘Do not move,’ said Chalon, quietly, ‘but do not take your eyes from him.’

There were seconds in which it seemed to Chalon that his heart had stopped, a timelessness in which he did no more than gaze into the snake’s eyes, watching for the merest shift of the head, the flicker along the coiled body that would warn of the coming strike. Should he risk an attack, he wondered? Would his lunge and flash of jaws be faster than the movement of the snake; could he reach the body and sink his teeth into it, somewhere behind the head? Should he take the risk and in the diversion give the vixen a free passage into the channel? Could she then turn and make an attack from the rear? Or must he simply wait?

The wound at his shoulder had begun to throb again in the race of his blood. His tongue had dried to the stiffness of old bracken and now his every muscle ached in the tightening of both his fear and his thoughts. And still the adder stared.

Chalon tensed his right paw. Retreat, he decided, was the only answer, but it had to be sudden, swift and sure. There would be no second chance, no hope if they scrambled in confusion. They would need to turn as one body and race for the nearest opening to another channel. The snake would follow, but they would outpace him with ease once the deadlock was broken.



He tensed the paw again, letting the toes feel for the firmness of ground beneath them. He would need every inch of leverage he could find in the backward spring. The toes slid through shells to rock. He felt his shoulder muscles tense and was about to murmur to the vixen when a fresher, deadlier scent reached him. Whitefaces! The pack had entered the channel still some distance away, but they were here. The vixen shivered again as she too nosed delicately and collected the scent.

'We must move back,' said Chalon. 'Turn when I do and do not stop until we reach the next channel. Head into it and keep going.'

The vixen stayed silent, but Chalon could feel her body flex in the flickers of mounting strength.

'Now!' he said, and turned as though released like a trapped tree branch.

His spring was higher and longer than the vixen's, so

that he had slithered into the wall of the channel and was a head and shoulders in front of her by the time her body brushed his. He heard the shells scatter as though driven by a giant tidal wave. There was a single whoosh of air as the snake made its lunge at their backs – but too late and too short for any contact to be made.

Chalon raced on, twisting against the damp walls, feeling the water trickle through to his flesh. The first opening he saw was to the west, leading as ever into darkness and emptiness, but he took it in one scrambling slide and was a body's length into it, skidding through sand and small stones before he felt the vixen's breath close to him. They ran for another ten, twenty yards, then padded to a halt, their tongues lolling, chests heaving, heads drooping. They stood silent and unmoving, listening now for the sounds of the Whiteface pack. There were none, but the scent was still there and growing.

'Are we still moving south?' asked the vixen.

'Perhaps,' said Chalon. 'It's difficult to know . . .'

He gazed around him, the walls of the channel were grey and dry, the surface beneath them unmarked, the way ahead as uninviting as it had been at the beginning. There was no way of knowing where they were – or where they might be going. Chalon turned from the vixen and trotted away. Movement and progress were their only hope. They had to stay ahead of the Whitefaces and trust to whatever fate might be guiding them that they were still heading south.

There was nothing else.

Chalon had no means of knowing if night had fallen, if there were stars or a moon, or if the sun had yet to sink. He could not tell if the day had ended, or a new one begun, for there had been no shift of light, no sleep and the pains of their hunger and thirst had long since subsided in the sheer monotony of movement and effort of remaining upright.

Their bodies, he knew, could not survive for much longer. Soon, at the next turning of the channel, across the next stretch of pebble, the vixen would stumble and fall, but there would be no strength in his body to drag her with him. It would be time then to rest, to ease his body to hers and sleep with her – and not wake. In a few days they would be reduced to bones, as white and empty as the skeletons they had passed, the last remains of the many others who had tried to make this journey. But sleep, when it came, would be welcome.

He nosed the air, scenting the Whitefaces, but now not so close. Perhaps they too were struggling and fighting for survival. He nosed again. Somewhere, as though in a dream, there was a fresher air, almost dancing; a shimmering movement on the lightest, most soothing touch of a breeze. A dream only . . . The vixen trotted ahead of him for the first time, her brush stiffening, her nose suddenly alert.

But she too, he knew, was only dreaming.

Nine

It was already daybreak. Somewhere far above him the light shimmered and dazzled, breaking the shapes of the tree heads to a scattering of black fingers. Behind them a blue-grey sky rolled its thin clouds on a cold wind from the north; there was snow on the way, thought Chalon. He shivered and came slowly to all-fours from the bed of dry leaves and bracken and gazed around him.

So this had been his dream – or was it reality? The trees were real, the bed still warm where he had slept, the sound of the wind and the crack of undergrowth too vivid for imagination. The air too was real, almost icy. He was in a copse beyond the Plain from where, ahead of him, the ground slid away to what might be a valley. At his back lay the yellow murk of the cloud, still motionless despite the wind. He had escaped it, but how and when? He padded a few paces forward, nosing and blinking as the sleep fell from him. And where was the vixen? He turned sharply, to left, to right, full circle. There was neither sight nor sound of her, not even her scent. She had been with him in the channel, within his sight. He could remember her urging him forward, her eyes bright and anxious. Then there had been nothing, as though sleep and blindness combined had spirited him into a void. Had he died, and was this his resting ground?

He padded forward again, reaching the edge of the trees at the tip of the slope. Sure enough, there was a valley

below him, long and deep, green and speckled with outcrops of pines, rough boulders, a winding lane and a stream. Here the morning light was spreading like slow flame, licking at the shape of the land to bring it to life, consuming the shadows as though they were drinking pools. This was real. He could smell the valley. He could hear the call of a high-flying hawk and the urgent rush of the stream. He could sense the wind, its iciness, and feel its snowy fingertips. He was not dreaming the cold or the changing Season. He had survived and was alive!

He turned back to the copse, his steps suddenly vital. The vixen – she had to be here. She could not . . .

She broke cover not five yards from him where a line of gorse and black nettles rose in a tangled wall. At first there was only her head and shoulders and the bulk of the two dead birds hanging from her mouth. Then, as Chalon came into her view, she dropped the birds, bounded forward and nuzzled her nose into his shoulders, her breath pouring over him, her body twisting to his, legs prancing, paws reaching to him. Chalon responded, limbs throbbing to her touch and the murmured affection of her whine.

‘I thought . . .’ she began breathlessly, easing away from him. ‘I thought you would sleep forever. There was no movement. You seemed . . .’ She closed on him again, this time resting her head on his shoulders.

‘What happened?’ said Chalon. ‘How did we get here?’

The vixen stood back and settled on her haunches.

‘I’ve tried to remember,’ she said, ‘but everything’s so hazy. All that’s clear now is the scent . . . the scent of fresh air. I felt it as though . . .’ she hesitated, her eyes flashing, ‘as though by magic, as though a paw had reached out to me and touched me, guided me. Does that make sense?’

Chalon stared at her. Did it, he wondered? Did it make any sense at all to imagine such things – to believe them?

‘I think I understand,’ he said, carefully.

‘I was so excited,’ continued the vixen, ‘so suddenly alive

I could think of nothing but moving on as fast as I could. And you followed. There was never any doubt – I *knew* where we were going, I could feel it. I knew that just ahead lay the end of the channel, that the Plain was almost behind us, that we would . . . ’ She paused again. ‘And then we were free. We were here! I padded out to fresh air, to the sight of the moon above us. It was wonderful!’

‘And did I . . . ’ began Chalon.

‘You were so weak. You were stumbling and hardly able to keep your legs, but I led you this far and then you collapsed. At first I thought you were dying. There was so little breath. I think we must have slept for many hours. And then, when I woke, I hunted, fed and found food for you. Here . . . ’ She trotted back to the dead birds. ‘You must eat. And there’s fresh water close by.’

‘What of the Whitefaces?’ asked Chalon, anxiously.

‘I’ve seen nothing, heard nothing, and there’s no scent. Perhaps they didn’t cross the Plain. Perhaps the adder reached them.’

Chalon padded to the gorse, nosed, returned to the vixen’s side and stared at her. ‘Have you seen the valley beyond here?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I was hunting on the slopes. It leads south.’

‘Did you see anything?’

‘No, nothing. It looks deserted. Perhaps that’s where we’ll find Briggan. There are pines on the hillsides, just the sort of place he’d choose for a home.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Chalon. ‘But for now we must rest and feed and be on our way before the midday sun.’ He turned his gaze to the skies. ‘The Season is changing fast. There’s snow on the wind.’

The vixen followed his gaze, then lowered her eyes slowly. ‘We shall be in the south by the end of the Spring,’ she said. ‘That too is something I know.’

Chalon watched her. ‘How is it that you know?’ he asked.

'I cannot be certain. There is something . . . something I do not understand. Some inner sense. I felt it in the channel. I feel it now. It grows.' She turned her head away. 'Is it as Ghek and Maychep said? Am I chosen?'

Chalon did not answer. He had no answer, for he too did not understand. He could do no more than nuzzle at her neck and reassure her with the closeness of his body.

They ran like streaks of light, almost dancing on their toes, their bodies tumbling through the hillside's growth as though charged with a surge of Spring. They cared nothing for what they had left behind, for what lay ahead, to east or west, or where their crazy dash might end. There was only the freedom, the cutting wind, high sun and open space. They heard nothing, save in distant echoes – the slow pipe of a marsh bird at the stream, the crackle of gorse, the thud of their paws on the grassy slopes, the whistle of the air as they sped on. This was living!

They had fed and rested again, watched for movement in the valley until daylight was full, seen nothing and, reassured and desperate to be free, begun their descent into the valley at a fast trot. Chalon had set the pace, feeling new strength in his legs, thankful that the wound no longer throbbed, but suddenly – and for no good reason he could explain – elated and brimming with the need to hurl himself forward. The trot had lengthened to a run, then to bursts of sprinting in which the vixen followed willingly, her whine in Chalon's ears urging him to go faster . . . still faster, until his whole body was a patchwork blur of grey and russet. She levelled with him, turned her head, flashed an eye, and moved ahead, her white coat flickering and passing to become a cloud he was chasing down the hillside. She weaved between boulders, went like a white feather in a drifting skim over the stony runs, disappeared into bracken, only to emerge again as though blown into life, and raced on.

Chalon's elation smothered all thoughts of danger, of what the valley might hold for them, of the search for Briggan, the threat of the Whiteface pack, and for the first time in what seemed a Season he had no real concern for the south or The Singing Tree. The purpose of the quest had not died, but he needed respite and the chance to return to something as simple as running and chasing for their own sake.

He watched the vixen veer towards the stream and race along its bankside, her low, lean litheness slipping like a sliver of fresh mist between the reeds. He followed, but edged slightly to the vixen's left so that she was always in full view. How graceful she was, how sure and confident of her every step and leap, how close to him in the sudden turn of her head, the lift of her ears to be certain he was still there – yet how remote. She was someone very special, he thought, perhaps someone chosen, perhaps destined to reach the south, and perhaps it was his fate that he should be with her. But for now it did not matter. Here there was only the valley and themselves and their shadows, and always the clean air to chase to wherever it might end . . .

It was late afternoon by the time they reached the southernmost reach of the valley. There was a new undulation to the ground, more rifts and hollows, twists and turns, and the hillsides were closer. Tree growth had thinned to a straggle of remote pines and the harsher outcrops of rocks and boulders. The stream had wound away to the west and carried with it the sounds to leave behind a groping silence. Now they could hear their steps, the trickling tinkle of a disturbed pebble, and their breath had already begun to hang on the air in the tightness of evening.

Chalon nosed ahead, conscious of the need to seek food, water and shelter before nightfall; conscious too of the fact that in spite of the day's freedom they had achieved nothing. There had been no encounters – not so much as a

rabbit or hare to be seen – and no signs of Briggan or his home. Their progress south had been steady but totally uneventful. They might, he thought, have been the only living things in that landscape, without even the challenge of the Whiteface pack to consider. Either the pack had not succeeded in crossing the Plain or emerged from it at a point far to the east, he decided.

Chalon nosed again, almost wishing for a scent – any scent – to reach him, but there was nothing until, in another hour and just as the sun was slipping behind the hills, there came a sound he did not immediately recognise. He heard the vixen whine and begin to pad fearfully around him.

‘What’s that?’ she asked, lifting her ears to the dull, metallic clang far ahead.

‘Man,’ said Chalon.

‘But not their voices?’ said the vixen.

‘No, not their voices. It must be their . . .’

Chalon hesitated, recalling the tales told by the elders of the places Men had built and the sounds they could make within them. This, he knew now, was one of them – the sound of a bell being tolled.

He trotted forward, beginning to climb the slope of the hillside to his left. He moved swiftly upwards, the vixen following, heading for the lone tree that topped the rise. Once there and sheltered by the tree from the keener wind that blew from the vale below, they peered into a thickening gloom in which there was but a single light, stark and fierce, like a staring eye. It came from what at first seemed to be no more than a mound of stones, but which grew in shape and structure as their eyes pierced the dusk to a tower.

‘Man’s home?’ said the vixen.

‘An abbey,’ said Chalon.

‘Abbey?’

‘The place where Man speaks to his heaven.’

The vixen stared, her head tilted in curiosity. 'But why the sound, and why the light?'

'The sound calls to the heaven. The light is for Men to see by. They do not have night eyes.'

The vixen continued to stare, her ears lifting again to the sound of the bell.

'Does the heaven answer?' she asked.

'Only to Men,' said Chalon, settling on his haunches.

The vixen came to his side. 'Why do we wait?' she asked.

Chalon thrust his head forward and nosed deeply on the air. 'There are others down there,' he said, slowly. 'White-faces.'

The vixen shivered, then lay down and followed Chalon's gaze beyond the abbey to where four shapes slid through the shadows towards the pool of light.

The Whitefaces were hungry. There was a deadly stealth to their slow, ground-hugging slide towards the abbey. Their bodies were lean and extended, as thin it seemed as white twigs from which their bent legs were no more than off-shoots. Their ears were primed, their brushes stiff, their eyes as fixed and steady as stones frozen into snow. A thin, wispy trail of breath rose from them, curling towards the blackening night sky. They moved in precise formation, the leader of the pack a half-body's length from the second in line to his left; the third as distant again to the right, and the fourth bringing up the rear in a central position.

Chalon watched them carefully, a touch of fear tingling beneath his coat, a sneaking admiration for their hunting expertise forcing him to anticipate their every step. They would begin to circle at the edge of the light until they had investigated all sides of the abbey; then the leader would move in, heading, Chalon guessed, for the single opening. There they would find the food they had already scented – meat or whatever the meal being prepared by the Men. But it was a desperate attempt. The pack could have no

knowledge of how many Men were in the abbey, of their strength or how they might retaliate. The rewards of stealth might be tasty, but the ploy in reaching them was hazardous. The pack's only advantage lay in numbers. With a strength of four they stood a chance of at least some prize – but would it be enough to satisfy?

Whatever, the Whitefaces had abandoned for the moment any hope of tracking Chalon and the vixen further. Perhaps they had not yet scented their trail, or been too far to the east to so much as catch the faintest whiff of it, and now were too hungry to search. Chalon took comfort in their good fortune. A determined, hate-charged pack was one thing; a pack ravished with hunger another. The one he might outwit, the other he might never have the energy to outrun.

The vixen murmured, her breathing deepening to a steady pant as she watched the pack. What thoughts did she have, wondered Chalon? The Whitefaces were her own kind; she might even recognise them. She knew well enough their stealth and skill, and would have no doubts of their strength and courage, but did she fear instinctively for them in their approach? Was she torn between staying silent on the hillside, concealing herself and safeguarding the chances of continuing the journey, and succumbing to the natural relationship she had with the hunters? Was it, he wondered, as much in her heart to help as it was to hide? He nuzzled her neck and settled her to silence.

The pack leader began to circle the pool of light, his nose almost scraping the ground, his eyes glowing with the tension of the hunt. Whatever it was they had nosed was beginning to overwhelm them, but still their stealth held. There was no break in the formation, no step out of place, not a paw levelled too soon or a movement made too hurriedly. They passed from Chalon's view, circling the abbey, exploring every stone, then came towards him again, this time edging into the pool of light but still at a

distance from what Chalon could now see was an open door.

The pack halted, as motionless as any one of the hundred boulders behind them. Eyes flashed, breath curled. They waited . . . three, four, five seconds, then the leader moved to the doorway. The others followed as silently, delicately, as shadows – but they came to within no more than two paces of the opening before the vale erupted in blinding flashes and shattering explosions.

Chalon's heart jumped at the first sounds of gunfire. The vixen struggled to all-fours, whining and trembling at his side. There were two more explosions, two intense flashes, and then the night echoed with the screams of pain, howls of anger, surprise, panic.

Chalon saw the pack leader thrown high like some wind-tossed strip of growth, blood pouring from his head. A second Whiteface fell instantly without ever raising himself from his belly. The third turned as though to charge away to the left, but was brought down in a twisting heap of fur and limbs and shimmering dust cloud as the shot thudded into his flanks. He struggled and scrambled at the earth, forelegs clambering for a hold, then lay still in the trail of his own blood. The fourth Whiteface had dived long and low to the right, beyond the sight and aim of the Man who stood wielding the gun in the doorway. The fox ran on, slithering like a breath between the boulders until he disappeared into the gathering gloom.

The Man lowered the gun, walked into the pool of light and moved among the bodies. He fired a second shot into the head of the still twitching pack leader, then crooked the gun and dragged the Whiteface to the side of the abbey. When the three bodies lay in a line the Man went inside and closed the door.

The hunt was over.

Chalon stiffened in an effort to control the trembling through his body. There was pain behind his eyes, a dull

thudding in his head, echoes of the gunfire mingling with the sound of the vixen's whine. They had witnessed mass slaughter; death and instant destruction. Three of the Whitefaces were already turning cold, their companion still running to whatever the greater fears of loneliness awaiting him. A danger might have been removed for Chalon and the vixen, but death also brought an emptiness to the living.

'It was the same at the riverbank,' said the vixen in a spasm of shivering. 'The same . . . for my sisters. The sound, the fire . . . death.' She faced Chalon. 'It was like that.' The shivering quickened. 'Is that why the bell sang? Did the Man's heaven answer? Did the bell call back? Is heaven death?'

Chalon nuzzled at the vixen's neck and urged her from the tree.

'We must go,' he said. 'Do not look back.'

They turned and made their way down the hillside, following a track that led on a south-westerly course, skirting the abbey, the pool of light and the scent of death and blood. Soon they were padding silently into the deeper growth of a twist in the valley. Ahead lay pine trees and the cover of gorse. The air was thinner, colder, pitted with the drift of the first sleet. Chalon quickened the pace, anxious to reach the pines in the hope of food and shelter, and just as anxious to lead the vixen from her misery. She had not spoken and barely registered recognition when Chalon glanced to assure himself that she followed. Her eyes were glazed, her body loose and limp, her steps careless, and when the sleet settled to snow she seemed not to notice it.

The real coldness of that night already lay deep in her heart.

Ten

In an hour their world was white. The snowfall was soft and steady, drifting on the lightest of breezes from the high, black sky. A softer light began to fill the pine woodland, chill and thin but stark on the translucent flakes; a light which set the trees and their branches to thrusting silhouettes, reaching out to Chalon and the vixen like bent bodies and twisted arms.

Soon there was no path for Chalon to follow, only the spread of the immaculate snowland, its delicate lift and sweeping fall, and he was forced to nose carefully at every few yards, stopping when he did so to be certain the vixen was still close. She followed without a murmur, her eyes fixing his in an expressionless gaze. It would take time, he knew, for her to be resigned to the deaths of the Whitefaces. The fact that she and Chalon had escaped the pack, that only one of them still lived and that the immediate danger of being tracked had passed, was strange comfort. The Whitefaces had been the vixen's kind, and danger or not, their deaths had been both vicious and pitiful. She mourned, and for that he could not blame her.

They had reached a higher knoll where the snow had not yet thickened when Chalon stopped and primed his ears against the faint sound he had heard ahead. The silence had settled with the snowfall as though trundled in on the breeze, a silence which seemed to part as they padded into it and could almost touch – a silence too in which even a

breath could be heard. The sound he had sensed was a movement, soft and stalking, behind which lurked a watchful eye. He nosed. He could detect the warmth of a body and hear what might be the beat of a heart, the race of blood as whoever watched grew increasingly uncertain of his own safety.

It was an animal, decided Chalon, but not a large one. Not Briggan. He nosed again. Now he could sense the body beginning to move, to shift from its cover and perhaps try to slither away. Instead, it came closer. Chalon peered intently into the darkness, willing his sight to twist over and through the drifting snowflakes, disregarding those that settled and melted instantly on his fur. He caught the blur of a body ahead, the erect ears, flash of an eye, then the shape of a face that grew before him as it turned. It was that of a hare.

Chalon remained motionless. The vixen stood less than a



shoulder's length from him, her gaze tight as she too recognised the shape.

'Food?' she asked, quietly.

Chalon waited. The prospect of the hare for supper wrenched at his stomach muscles and set his body throbbing with hunger, but this hare had no fear; it did not bolt, it did not shiver, and there was no panic in the level stare. This hare was watching them, waiting, it seemed, to identify them. It might almost be expecting them.

Chalon lifted his right paw as if to pad forward. The hare did not move. He lowered the paw slowly and craned his neck and head, nosing every inch of the air. The hare rose higher on its back legs until its body was near vertical, then came on in two gigantic leaps to land directly in front of Chalon, less than a yard away.

'You're very late,' said the hare, sharply. 'I had hoped you'd be here before nightfall. Had some trouble?'

Chalon eased back, but had no time to answer before the hare was speaking again.

'Never mind, you're here now. Briggan sent me. He doesn't care for this sort of weather, you know, so he asked if I'd keep an eye open for you. Been here most of the day. Still . . . I'm to guide you from here. Briggan's sett is to the north-west. Not far. There's food there. I really think we should go before this snow gets any worse. The sky's full of it. Ready?'

His ears stiffened, then he turned and bounded forward.

'What should we do?' asked the vixen, anxiously.

'Precisely as he says,' said Chalon, and followed.

They went deeper into the woodland, leaving the knoll for the thicker snow of a hollow where exposed tree roots crept around them like black, frozen fingers, then moved higher to brush through a thicket of dead nettles and bracken where the snowfall cascaded over them in icy showers. Soon they were turning north, padding along the faint outline of a track bordered by the strangely mis-

shapen humps of snow-covered rocks. They passed the gaunt face of a sheer granite mound from which two hawks leapt into flight at their approach; descended into yet another hollow where the pine heads were so close the snowfall was little more than a silver sprinkling across the sand and stone, then began to climb, this time to the west along a much stiffer slope. Here there was less chance of a firm foothold, a tendency to slip and slide or be tripped by a hidden root. The hare, as familiar with the ground by night as he was by day, was constantly ahead of them, his eyes flashing as he waited for Chalon and the vixen to catch up.

'Not far now,' was all he said as they topped the slope and made off down a gentler incline into an area where the tree trunks thickened and branches tangled.

Finally, and just when it seemed to Chalon he would be forced to ask for the chance to rest, the hare halted, waited for them to join him and sat quite still.

'You really can't see much of the opening to the sett from here,' he said, 'but believe me, it's there – just ahead of you on that drift of the hill. There's an old pine where the roots form an archway. Enter that, and you're home.' He sat upright. 'I'm to tell you that there's food inside the first tunnel. You're to eat and rest and then move on. Briggan takes to deeper quarters at this time of the Season, so you've quite a tramp ahead of you before you reach him, but the sett's warm and dry and there's no danger.'

'Thank you,' said Chalon. 'But how did you know . . .'

'Don't ask questions,' interrupted the hare. 'I really haven't any answers. If there's anyone who knows anything at all these days, it's Briggan. As far as I'm concerned, you're alive and here, and now my job's over. If you don't mind, I'll be on my way. Food is going to be difficult enough tonight and the cold's beginning to get at me. I do hope we'll meet again. Perhaps when the weather has improved. Good luck.'

He flashed an eye, flicked his ears and bounded away like a stone skimming over the snowy surface. Chalon and the vixen waited until he was out of their sight, then headed for the brooding darkness of the old pine tree.

The silence had changed; now it was closer, tighter, enclosing them within itself in the tunnel of the sett; a silence that was not of their making, thought Chalon, nosing ahead into the darkness. They were trespassers. He stopped and peered into the black stretch of tunnel ahead. Here, it ran straight and high yet, like those through which they had already passed since entering the sett, it was unused. Stray fingers and hairy clusters of root formations hung from the roof; the earth was tinder dry beneath scatterings of pebbles and old stones, the paw marks ancient, the scent of the place that of the distant past.

Wherever this tunnel led its importance in the structure of Briggan's home had long since been discounted, for this was an almost forgotten back-door run to the central chambers. But it had been a wise move and shrewd precaution by Briggan to have Chalon and the vixen enter by such a route. Should they have been followed there was little likelihood of Briggan being involved in any scuffles, and he would have had more than adequate warning of their approach. Chalon would not have expected anything less of badger strategy.

He turned his gaze to the vixen. 'Are you very tired?' he asked, gazing into her still forlorn eyes.

'I have no wish to stop, if that's what you mean,' she replied. 'The food has restored my strength. I shall be all right.'

It was true, thought Chalon, the food left at the entrance to the tunnel had been a saviour, as much as they could eat, and fresh. Briggan had anticipated their weakness, but there had been no mark or message of the path they should take. Having eaten their fill, they could do no more than

move deeper into the tunnel and follow it wherever it might lead.

Chalon nuzzled the vixen's jowl. 'It will soon be time to sleep,' he said, then turned back to the darkness and padded on.

The cold of the night had been left behind almost as soon as they had eaten, and now, as they trotted deeper into the sett, a hugging warmth surrounded them, the secure almost intimate warmth of earth which had lain undisturbed for many Seasons. Its scents were familiar to Chalon; they reminded him of his cub days in the den when the home beneath a tree had been a world in which he sensed no fear, when the touch of earth had always been warm and welcoming and its closeness to his eye, when he lay on the verge of sleep, been a pattern he could trace and never fail to recognise. It must be much the same for Briggan, he thought. He would know every inch of the tunnel, every gentle turn, hump and hollow, for it had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember, and the home of badgers for generations.

This tunnel – and the many others that made up the sett – would teem with memories whenever he used it, and each would be a world unto itself. Such a home must be a treasure, especially in these times when the lands above it were so troubled. What he would give for such a paradise! He nosed at the walls, collecting the stronger scent of earth, loosening a small stone that fell without a sound to the soft sand. He felt consoled and refreshed in such a simple gesture. It proved, he thought, that some things had not changed and would always be as he remembered them.

The tunnel began to turn gently then narrow before broadening again and skirting the sprawling arms of tree roots, dark and massive in their hold. They had been descending on a steady slope for some time, and the sight of the roots confirmed for Chalon that they were now deep into the hillside and moving still deeper. They passed a

smaller, narrower tunnel where a part of the roof had collapsed, then edged their way carefully around an old bed of hay and bracken, a springtime resting place, guessed Chalon, used on those afternoons when Briggan waited here for the last of the sunlight to slip away and evening to close in.

The tunnel turned again, this time sharply to avoid a smooth rock face and drift of loose stones. The roof slanted, so that Chalon was forced to lower his head and hunch his shoulders. Now the darkness thickened, the silence measured their every step, but still there were no distinctive paw marks, nothing that Chalon could recognise as being recent.

'Do you think Briggan knows we're here?' asked the vixen at his back. 'Could he have heard us?'

'He knows,' said Chalon. 'He will have known since we set foot in the tunnel.'

And it would be so, for if there was one thing Chalon had learned during his life in the woodlands it was respect for the badger's instinctive sense of an approach. Briggan might well be some distance away, but an inner knowledge would have told him that his visitors had arrived and were closing. He would not need to scent them, or hear them. He would simply know they were here, and with that patience given only to the badger, be content to wait.

The tunnel heightened again and ran ahead to a wider stretch where, even at this distance, Chalon could see the first evidence of Briggan's presence – paw marks, large and new and precise in their tracks. They were close to him. Chalon began to nose, seeking the faintest scent. His ears pricked at what he thought was a sound ahead. He halted, let the vixen reach his side, and settled an unmoving gaze on the darkness. In a moment it would break. There would be the sounds of slow shuffling, of deeper breathing, then of a familiar wheeze. The shape of Briggan would grow until his tiny eyes pierced the gloom . . .

‘Welcome, my friends,’ said the voice. ‘You are indeed *most* welcome.’

Eleven

'I warn you now – the true test of your endurance has still to come. Whatever your success so far, however you may have achieved it, whatever the effort, these are as nothing to all that lies ahead. Your path, my friends, is already destiny.'

The words seemed to gather the stillness of the air to them, then drift around and above Chalon and the vixen until they were cocooned. Briggan spoke slowly, carefully, his eyes fixed on their faces, his body settled comfortably against the wall of the sett – but there was no menace in his tone. The sound of his voice was level and reassuring in the gloom. The vixen licked nervously at her lips and shifted her front paws. Her tiredness and the strain of the journey had slipped from her at the sight of Briggan. Now she sat before him enthralled, anxious for him to continue and not miss a syllable of what he had to say.

Briggan waited a moment, stared first at the vixen, then at Chalon, eased his bulk still deeper into the comforting wall, and went on:

'I feel my own spirits lifted by the fact that you have come this far. When I knew you were in the sett, when I could hear and nose the first sounds and scent of you, even the cold of the Season passed. It is little short of a joy that you should be here. But there must be many questions – to which, perhaps, there are some answers – and unless you are too weary, I am prepared to listen to them.'

'No – no, we are not at all tired, really,' said the vixen. 'I know it's well into the night, but . . . '

'Tiredness is something we have learned to live with,' said Chalon. 'Being alive is enough. And as for this place –' He gazed around the chamber – 'well, this is perfect. I would not wish to close my eyes even if I knew I should.'

Briggan sighed. 'Good. Then let us continue, for there is still much to be said, seen and done, and time, even in this timeless Season, is not with us. Where shall we begin?'

'With who I *really* am,' said the vixen, without hesitation.

Briggan eyed her intently. 'The chosen Whiteface – or so it has been foretold. But that, in itself, is no answer. It merely repeats legend. Let me go back to the earlier days, soon after the Great Death, when there were those, my own ancestors among them, who survived to see where Men had taken this good earth and almost destroyed it. Such days were a time of despair; there seemed no reason to continue, to even think of a future, let alone prepare for it. But it is out of such circumstances, my friends, that true faith and hope and the ability to foresee are born. I cannot explain such things – perhaps there is no explanation. It is enough that we accept and believe. Thus, when the mutations began, when those of our kind were transformed, sometimes hideously beyond the shapes and colours of those we had always known and accepted, there were wiser ones than you and I who saw within that cruel fate the spirit of survival. The outcasts would survive and find their place and be among those who would lead to the better, safer world. The Whiteface vixen would be among them – she and the companion whom destiny would decree. This is as it was foretold all those Seasons ago.'

'But can such things be?' asked the vixen. 'Can legend become life – the reality of now?'

'Legend cannot, but the faith which inspires it can. You are the embodiment of such faith.'

'And the south, The Singing Tree – are they legend, fact, or simply faith?'

Briggan's eyes twinkled in the darkness. 'I have not seen the south or ever thought to travel there, but it does exist, as you are destined to discover. And if there is a south, then there is The Singing Tree.'

'So you cannot say for certain?'

'I can say for certain that there was a Great Death. I can say for certain there was the Burning Air. I can say for certain and show you, how this earth was brought to the very brink of its extinction – *to the brink*, where much of it will remain forever. But the brink is not the abyss, and where there is the slenderest strand of life there is the hope of renewal. So I can say for certain that beyond here – to the south – the earth is already changing. True, the area is small, perhaps twenty woodlands large, but size is of no importance when such a place is growing. The south began as no more than threads of a new beginning. Today those threads have tightened to a firm hold.'

'And Men must know of it?' said Chalon.

'It may be so. It may of necessity have to be so, for Men too are a part of this earth. Those you have seen – those who kill and battle for survival – are on the brink. They will be there for a thousand Seasons, perhaps they will always be so, but there are those among Men who must also journey to their south. Theirs and ours may be one and the same.'

'Should it be so?' asked the vixen. 'Men still call their heaven from the abbey and summon only death. That cannot be south, can it?'

'Men have always called. It is in their nature to believe in something beyond themselves whose power they wish to be infinite, yet confined within the limits of human dreams. Men called before the Great Death; they called during it – and still call. If there are answers, they have not heard them.'

'But why must we struggle so hard during our journey?'

asked Chalon, with the merest hint of annoyance. 'And why were we tracked by the Whitefaces? They hunted with hate.'

Briggan shifted his bulk. 'Now there speaks the practical approach! Why indeed? To that I have no answer. If I could lead you from this sett to the south – simply turn the next corner and show it to you – I would do so gladly. But if the south were no more than a turn away, it would not be a beginning. It would already be part way to an end. As for the Whitefaces tracking you – there will always be those who fear the future, who wish only for the order as they know it and can command it. This pack knows of what has been foretold, but fears the reality, for that would mean the end of life as they have shaped it. They will kill for that.'

Briggan struggled to all-fours. 'Come, it is time for me to show you how the south has grown and your place in it. Follow me.'

They went in silence, following the slow plod of Briggan deeper into the sett. He showed neither haste nor sense of urgency and wheezed almost rhythmically as he made his way along a straight run of the chamber and then through a series of twists and turns, between root growths, over stone beds and drifts of dry sand. Chalon could feel the warmth thickening, the air gathering against him with the intensity of a summer Season. He was as anxious as the vixen to discover what Briggan had to show them, but held to a patient pace in the badger's steps and urged his companion to do the same. Briggan had his own way of life and appreciation of time, and nothing would disturb them.

They passed through a narrower and much tighter tunnel – hardly ever used, thought Chalon, judging by the damaged walls and ancient clutter on the floor – and then into a chamber which had once been the heart of the home. Here, there were scatterings of hay and bracken, curled, dead leaves and the skeletons of twigs. A much larger

branch, a scratching post, lay in a corner. Chalon could make out the marks along its length, a fond reminder to Briggan, no doubt, of a time when youngsters had romped here and prepared for their first tentative ventures into the outside world.

Two tunnels led from the chamber. That to the left was the older of the two, with its entrance blocked partly by a fall of earth. The tunnel to the right, to which Briggan turned, had an immediately fresher, livelier appearance, as though having been carefully cleaned and maintained.

Briggan reached its entrance and stopped.

'We are now in the deepest part of the sett,' he said, his eyes gleaming. 'It was to this area that my ancestors retreated after the Great Death. They lived here for many Seasons, venturing out in pairs only for the purposes of obtaining food. And it was here, my friends, that they gathered with many others of the woodlands and heard of the south and The Singing Tree. They would talk long into the night of the new beginning and listen closely to the tales told by those who had already travelled south. Today, only a few are permitted to see the stones they left behind as their mark of faith and commitment. In your case, of course, there is no question of your not seeing them – but, even so, I would ask that you go gently. I do not wish the place to be disturbed more than is necessary.'

He turned and plodded into the tunnel.

It may have been a sense of expectation, a sudden lifting of the spirits, or perhaps the very presence of Briggan, but Chalon knew and could feel instinctively a change of atmosphere. The tunnel itself was no larger than any of those they had passed through; its walls were smooth, its floor neat and orderly, but now, he thought, the air was different. There was a new closeness, a sense of others watching, perhaps of guarding, almost of distant breathing. But there was no one here save themselves; no one living. Was this, then, the place of the spirits of the

dead, or did he only imagine they were here? Were those eyes watching him from the walls, or merely the gleam of stones? And was the sound beyond that of their soft padding and Briggan's wheeze the beat of other hearts?

Chalon felt a nervous shiver in his shoulders and sensed too that the vixen at his side was equally troubled. She glanced at him, but said nothing.

Briggan led them round a slow bend, down a steady descent over sand that was almost velvet beneath their paws, and finally into a chamber from which there were no tunnels leading off. This was a complete dead-end. He gestured with a paw for them to wait at the chamber entrance and moved slowly round its perimeter, taking care to keep his steps to a precise line. When he was a yard or so from them, he gestured again.

'Come forward slowly,' he said, 'but no more than three paces. Then stop. Wait a moment until your eyes are accustomed to the darkness – and when they are you will see the stones.'



Chalon and the vixen did as they were told without a murmur. They waited, at first blinking rapidly in an effort to hurry the process of sight, then slowly, delicately, as the shapes about them came to life. Before them, arranged in an almost complete circle on the floor of the chamber, was a collection of stones, some yellow, some grey, some in the softer shades of brown and russet. Each stone was roughly the same size as its neighbour, each placed the same distance apart. It was only at the top of the circle that a break occurred, as though a stone had been removed or not placed in position. The ground around the stones was immaculately level and without the faintest mark. Every grain of sand, it seemed, had been chosen, cleaned, polished and smoothed to its position.

'These are the stones of the south,' said Briggan, his voice echoing in the high-roofed chamber. 'Each stone represents the first departures south of those who believed. At your feet are the stones of the hares, the rabbits, the voles, the shrews. To your right, those of the squirrels, the otters, the deer, the first foxes, stoats and weasels. As each of his kind set off to find the south, so he would place his stone in the circle – and when the circle was completed, they believed, so would the south be settled and be the new beginning. Only then would The Singing Tree be in full leaf.'

He paused a moment. 'As you see, the circle is not complete. The last place has been awaiting your arrival – the Whiteface vixen who would be the first of the chosen mutants to travel south. When her stone is in position, so our kingdom as it has survived will be reborn.' He paused again. 'Your stone, vixen, is here, at my side. It is pure white, like your coat, and must be placed by yourself in the space awaiting it. Neither I nor your companion will be present while you make the placing. That is for you to undertake alone. We shall wait in the tunnel.'

Briggan shuffled carefully back to them.

'This is the most ancient place in our kingdom and I am glad to have lived long enough to have made this last journey to it. When the stone is placed, I shall not return. One day, in the Seasons to come, there may be others who will discover the circle. Perhaps they will not understand why the stones are arranged as they are, or what they represent. That, my friends, will remain a mystery to them – but no one will ever look upon this circle without knowing that here is belief. And so it was, and is, and ever shall be.'

Day broke gently and without a murmur in the high western skies beyond the woodland. There was already a shimmer of soft sunlight, a fingertip touch of warmth where the first rays slid through the tree-heads to the white world below them. The snowscape sparkled; shadows, deep and black, hugged themselves and tightened on the light. There was no breeze, no sound, no movement. The world here lay at ease, dozing without dreams in its silent bed of white.

Chalon nosed the air gingerly at the entrance to the sett. The briskness made him blink, then nose again, more excitedly, at the prospect of an emptiness through which anything might trespass at any moment. He eased his shoulders through the entrance, then his body, shook himself and gazed around him. There was a softness to the place he had not sensed the night before, perhaps a loneliness, as though the trees, tufts of black growth, scattering of exposed rocks and lift and fall of the earth beneath the snow had escaped whatever harsher world lay beyond them and awaited their fate.

The trees to his right were closer and darker, creating a patch of intense shadow; those to the left more openly spaced, so that he could see through them to where the land shelved along a slope of snowy limbs. Ahead of him, the hillside rose taut and almost sheer in those places where the

snowfall had drifted. Above him, the trunk of the dead pine stood thick and unfeeling, a straggling necklet of icicles gripping its lifeless bark.

He shook himself again, already sensing the warmth of the sun, but conscious too of the comforting heat of the sett beginning to lift from his body. He would not linger. The vixen would wake soon and he had no wish for her to be alone in the sett. It would be long into the morning before Briggan stirred, and then only to stretch and yawn and put aside his hunger until evening. There would be time for exploration, a meal and further rest before hearing of the next stage of their journey.

And there would be a next stage, of that he was quite certain. There would be no turning back now, no hesitation in the vixen's mind that the struggle south might prove too dangerous, too great an effort. As Briggan had said, their path was destiny. Fate, if fate had been the force behind their meeting at the crater, had taken charge. But he had no regrets. The sight of the circle of stones had been confirmation of the strength that had brought him this far, and confirmation too of Lamlett's belief. If she had seen the circle, heard Briggan's words and witnessed the new life in the Whiteface after she had placed her stone in position, she would have agreed: the south, wherever it lay from here, was worth the journey.

And yet Chalon's happiness for the Whiteface had also brought its worry – for who, he wondered, was he? If the vixen had been chosen, if it had been foretold that she would travel south accompanied by a dog fox, then why him? Had that been coincidence, the twist of fate, or had he, by whatever power it was that guided, been singled out – and if so, to what was he journeying?

He was growing older, thinner, less able to find the stamina, sometimes the enthusiasm, for the unknown. Could he travel on to a new life when life itself was ebbing, when whatever brief Seasons of it were left might just as

easily be spent here, in this woodland, seeking his comfort and rest wherever he could find it? Was it fitting, he wondered, that one almost at the end of his life should take his place in the new beginning? Or did he serve another purpose?

There were no answers in the fresh morning sunlight, and the questions could not yet be asked of the vixen. She had found herself and discovered the role she must play; she was chosen; she must reach the south. She had placed her stone and completed the circle. She wished also for Chalon to be with her, of that he was equally certain, even if she could not explain the reason why and perhaps did not seek to understand. It was sufficient that they were together and had come this far. In that, he pondered, lay an answer.

He nosed the air again, finding a new scent drifting towards him from the north. The scent of Men. He tensed, pricked his ears and listened carefully. Sure enough he could hear them . . . voices, the thud and slither of foot-falls. Hunters, he decided, Men in search of food.

He turned back to the sett and snuggled into the warmth of the tunnel. He would wait and watch to see if they too were travelling south.

Twelve

Days merged, one to the next, in the changing faces of winter; days when the sun shone and the snowscape sparkled; when heavy skies brought more snow and the light went unnoticed through dawn to dusk; when there was only cold, freezing touches of frost, lingering mists and the Season's emptiness.

Chalon took no count of the hours, for time had come to a halt. The vixen had at first been anxious to continue the journey and urged Briggan to tell them of the path ahead and direction they must take, but had resigned herself to a patient wait when he had spoken two nights after the placing of the stone of how best they might begin.

'Do not be in too great a hurry,' he had said, finishing the last of a late supper. 'The Season is against you at the moment, and there is nothing to be gained by adding the miseries of poor weather to your difficulties. Wait awhile, at least until the snowfall is over. A few days – no more – I promise. And then, when you are fully refreshed, when there is a deal more flesh on your bones, you may begin. You will travel westwards, beyond this woodland, until you reach the gentleness of the southern dales. A pleasant enough part of the country, especially in summer – but for you, my friends, there will be danger. There is a village you must skirt, the home of Men, and not, I regret to say, the best of Men either. They are hunters – primitive – and will kill almost anything on sight, even themselves if they have

a mind to. They are, quite frankly, stupid, the worst of their kind; to be pitied, perhaps, but of no benefit to you. Beware, then, the village. And, more importantly, beware the hunting parties.'

He had turned to Chalon. 'You may well have seen or scented them on your forays beyond the sett. You will know by now that they are about. Food, warmth, clothing . . . their priorities are simple enough, and they will spare no effort in securing any one of them, all in one swoop should the opportunity arise. So I tell you, be careful. Your immediate danger will be the woodland itself where the hunters are now at their strongest and most prolific. Once into the dale and beyond the village, you should have an untroubled run to the lake and the mountains from where you will make the final journey south.'

He had paused and yawned. 'But more of that tomorrow, or the day after, or whenever we think it safe for you to begin. For the moment, be content; rest, eat well and think only of your good fortune this far. I will make all the necessary arrangements. There are many others ready and willing to help, but they too will be watching the snowfall and probably just as anxious as yourselves for it to end. Sleep well, my friends.'

And thus had begun another night in the sett; hours of darkness through which Chalon and the vixen had exchanged no more than general conversation, neither wishing to show their excitement at the prospect ahead. The vixen's sleep had been light and fitful, broken repeatedly by her soft whine as dreams carried her ahead of the realities. Chalon too had found sleep difficult. More than once he had taken himself from the chamber to the entrance to the sett and stared long and deep into the night sky, sometimes to gaze without thought at the stars and moon; sometimes to watch the steady drift of a fresh fall of snow; sometimes simply to listen and scent the air.

There had always been movement and soft sounds – the

leap of a hare, the scuffle of a rabbit, crack of a bird on the move, hurried dash of a wood mouse – and occasionally the harsher sounds of Men, the hunters. Once, on a night when the frost shimmered on the air like splinterings of light, there had been the sickening scream of a wounded animal, an echoing sound that carried high above the tree-heads and froze on the stars. Chalon had shivered, suddenly conscious of the difficulties he still had to face and overcome and, for a moment, wishing that the sett and its warmth, the comforting security of Briggan and the plentiful supply of food would be unending.

Later, still seated at the entrance to the sett, he had watched the moon glide above him through a silence that was as peaceful as any he could remember. He had been at one with himself until almost the first touch of dawn, his mind cleared of dangers, paths ahead, dales, villages, Men, the south, The Singing Tree – at one, perhaps, with his true destiny.

Certainly, he had not felt the iciness of the cold, nor heard the soft pad of the vixen at his back as she joined him. And so they had sat in silence until morning, content in simply watching, scenting and waiting for the shift of the breeze that would warn of the coming warmer air.

‘Wait!’

The hare’s eyes flashed, his single word of command spinning across the frozen air like the crack of ice, his body tightening to stone, unmoving, merging instantly with the back-drop of tangled winter growth.

Chalon and the vixen, only two yards behind him, obeyed without question, their bodies sinking to the snow-packed earth without a sound. Chalon peered ahead, nosed the air quickly, felt the vixen’s warm breath at his side, but could see nothing – the woodland seemed unchanged, white and taut with frost, empty and silent . . .

They had travelled less than a mile from the sett, moving

as lightly as shadows, hugging the deeper stretches of the wood exactly as Briggan had instructed on his announcement that morning that it was time to leave.

'The snowfall is over for now,' he had said, 'and our friends await your beginning. The hare will guide you to the track to the south. From there you will reach the dale. Beyond that lies the lake and the mountains where Valdar, the stag, will lead you on. And may all speed and safety be with you, my friends. May you reach the south – and let there be rejoicing on your arrival. I shall know of it, rest assured. The news will travel fast, far back to the lands of Ghek and Maychep, and beyond that.'

And then he had led them from the chamber to the entrance to the sett where the hare was already waiting.

'My last words to you are of warning,' Briggan had said. 'Watch for the hunters. Avoid the Men at all costs. Now go.'

The vixen had begun to thank him for his help, guidance, for the comforts of the sett, but he had raised a paw to silence her.

'It is enough that you have been here and placed your stone. The circle is complete. Destiny is shaped as it was foretold. You have only to listen to your heart, strengthen your courage and stay close to your companion.'

There had been no further words, no gestures, nothing then save the sound of their soft padding across the snowscape from the sett. They had looked back many times, but there had been no sight of Briggan in the darkness of the tunnel – or had that last sudden gleam been a watching eye or simply a trick of the light on a pebble . . .

'Do not move,' warned the hare again, without looking at them.

Chalon's head lifted, his ears tuned for the sound that had brought them to a halt. Whatever the hare had heard must be ahead, he thought, for he could detect nothing to either left or right. He listened closely. Somewhere a bird rose from a thicket, a sharp, single rush of air and snap of

twig, then as the silence levelled again, he caught it – the swish and thud of a step, two steps, three, then many.

‘Hunters!’ hissed the hare. ‘Moving eastwards.’

The vixen nuzzled at Chalon’s shoulder, her eyes lifting to him.

‘Should we move?’ she asked, quietly.

‘Let the hare decide,’ answered Chalon. ‘He will see them before we do. He will know.’

They waited, stiff as corpses in the snow, only their eyes moving. The steps came nearer, but on a line of approach to their left which, if the hunters held to it, would carry the group across their path.

Chalon stared at the wider opening among the trees through which he sensed the party would emerge. The light there was grey, whittled to streaky patches among the darker bulks of the trees, cloud rags discarded from the winter sky. There was no breeze as yet, nothing to disturb the hanging frost and ice.

He held his stare until he saw the first drift of breath, a slow, misty meander that thickened then came ahead of the bodies like a limp flag. The leading Man of the group of six was the tallest and thickest, a sprawling heap of a Man who, had it not been for his stoop, would have been a giant. His clothing, like that of the others, was a collection of patched and stitched skins among which, Chalon noted with a shiver, were numerous coats of fox. The Man carried only a spear, while the others, following now in single file behind him, brandished a variety of clubs and hammer-head weapons. One had a length of rope wound around his chest; another carried a net; two of the Men supported a tree branch from which hung the bodies of rabbits, a hare and numerous squirrels.

There was no sound among them save from the last of the party, a shorter and much younger member, a girl Man, who whimpered and seemed unable to walk upright like the others. As the party passed, the girl stumbled and was

dragged roughly back to her feet by one of the elders. There was no shaped foot on the girl's left leg, noticed Chalon. Where the toes should have been splayed, there was only a bulge of dead flesh on mis-shapen bone, so that the leg went ahead like a stick and made the girl totter with each step.

But it was not only the stump of the foot that caught his attention – it was the girl's hair, long and smooth and white as the snow that made him flinch; hair as white as the vixen's coat. Chalon's eyes flashed. A Man mutant?

He felt the vixen stiffen at his side as she too saw the hair. The girl stumbled again, this time falling towards Chalon, her arms flaying out in the snow. The elder turned, shouted, but made no attempt to assist. Slowly, painfully, the girl rose to her knees, dragging the dead foot into a position of leverage. She began to heave herself upright, but paused midway through the effort and stared ahead of her – directly into Chalon's eyes.

There was a moment when the girl's mouth opened, when her eyes widened like suns slipping between clouds; a moment when her stare and that of Chalon were fixed along a single beam of recognition. Chalon's jaws tightened, his ears lowered, but neither he nor the girl made a sound. Only their breath touched. The girl continued to stare, the brightness of her eyes mellowing, then she brushed the white hair from the side of her face and struggled to her feet. The elder shouted, the girl moved, and with no more than a glance at Chalon rejoined the party.

'She saw you!' said the vixen. 'The girl Man saw you!'

Chalon flinched again. 'But she made no sound,' he murmured. 'Why?'

'Did you see her hair?' said the vixen. 'I have never seen hair like that. Is that how all girl Men come to the nest? Who was she?'

Chalon nuzzled at her jowl. 'Save your questions.

Perhaps the hare knows.'

They remained still and silent in the snow until the sound of the hunters was no more and their scent had faded.

'That, my friends, was probably one of the many parties hereabouts,' said the hare, joining them in a single bound. 'Thankfully they seemed preoccupied with moving on.'

'But the girl Man saw me,' said Chalon. 'She stared straight at me.'

'I thought so,' replied the hare. 'She's a mutant. You can tell by the hair.' He glanced apologetically at the vixen. 'Not that . . . Well, such things happen. You were lucky. The girl must have been frightened.'

'And what about her foot?' said the vixen. 'She could not walk.'

'There are many such instances,' said the hare. 'You will see them in the dale. But save your curiosity. A moment's hesitation could prove fatal. You must keep moving. And so must we.' He turned and gazed ahead of him. 'There's a deeper stretch of the wood from here, but the track is easy, even in the snow. At the end of that, I must leave you. By then you will be close to Alom, the red squirrel, who is waiting to meet you – or at least I hope he's waiting.'

'You doubt it?' asked Chalon.

The hare faced them again. 'I have some fears. I suppose you noticed the hunters had killed squirrels?'

'Yes . . . yes, I did,' said Chalon.

'Squirrels from Alom's drey, I shouldn't wonder. And that, my friends, does not bode well. Still, we must take the chance. Perhaps the hunters have had their fill from that area for the day. Come, we must move on – and, please, as silently as possible.'

They went like gentle ghosts.

Thirteen

The hunters' tracks were still fresh, the frozen bloodstains of their catch sparkling with life, the path scattered and crumpled underfoot to a maze of slides and ridges where the group had spent time securing their quarry to the carrying stick. A dead place breathing death, thought Chalon.

He nosed slowly but carefully about him, the vixen never more than a few feet from his side, her body in one moment tense, in the next shivering in the gripping cold. They were alone again, the hare having said his farewells and wished them well before bounding back into the darker woodland, but they were certainly not lost, for the place was exactly as he had described. There were tall pines along a gentle lift of the land to a higher ridge, runs of haphazard hawthorn and, to their left, a long, winding slope that eased away to a clump of beech trees. It was there, the hare had said, that they would find Alom and whatever was left of his drey. Perhaps not a deal, thought Chalon, nosing again at the blood and crushed snow.

He turned his gaze to the slope. The hunters had gone in single file to the beeches, no doubt at first light, and it was there they had made their killing of squirrels before carrying them back to the track. Chalon had seen at least a dozen dead on the stick; others might have been wounded; Alom himself might have died – whatever, the hunters had created havoc and almost certainly set the colony to flight. The problem now was how to find Alom.

'Shall we wait?' asked the vixen, shivering again. 'Are we safe?'

'There are no hunters now,' said Chalon, 'but they could return.' He nosed the air, this time sensing for the drift of a scent on the higher levels. There was nothing. 'We must seek Alom out for ourselves,' he said.

'But where – in which direction?' asked the vixen. 'Perhaps we should search in different directions.'

'It would be unwise to split up,' said Chalon. 'We have always been together.'

'But time is shortening. The hours of light left to us are few. Suppose I stay here, at the drey, while you search on the higher slopes. That way, we shall not miss Alom. If he returns, I shall be here. If you find him, you can bring him to the beeches.'

Chalon gazed round him. He was not in favour of leaving the vixen, but she was right, the hours of light would be brief and what there was of the pale sunlight was already beginning to slip away. The dusk would come quickly, the darkness of night swallowing it within minutes.

'Would you feel safe?' he asked. 'Would you promise not to stray from the trees?'

'I promise,' said the vixen.

'There would be shelter for you down there,' Chalon went on, 'and perhaps food. On the other hand . . .'

'We are wasting time,' urged the vixen. 'Please, do as I say. I shall be quite safe. Now be on your way. There's a lot of ground to cover if you're to be back before nightfall.' She came close to him and nuzzled affectionately, encouragingly at his neck. 'But hurry, all the same.'

They parted, the vixen padding lightly down the slope until the whiteness of her coat gleamed like a moon against the beeches, Chalon heading towards the straggle of pines on the higher ridge. They both paused once to turn and watch the other, then the vixen was gone and Chalon climbed higher.

The going was harsher than he had imagined. At first the snow was soft and no deeper than the tops of his paws, but soon it began to thicken then tighten to a solid pack of ice. He found it more difficult to find a grip, increasingly painful to maintain any momentum and still breathe easily. His limbs ached, the old wound throbbed and his eyesight began to weaken. Shapes drifted into and out of focus as though carried on a slow whirl of white wind; where there had been trees, there was suddenly space; where the ice-pack appeared to be an open run, there were trees thrusting towards him, gathering like a forest of black legs to crush him. He paused, struggling for a hold on a drift of exposed rock, and breathed deeply. The ridge was still high above him and the slope steeper, but perhaps there was a face of rocks he could hold on to, perhaps the snow would be thinner. He moved on.

The light had faded to a grey wash by the time he reached the first of the pine trees. Here, so much higher, the beech trees far below him, there was the faintest hint of a breeze, colder but more invigorating, so that he was able to gulp at it and feel its freshness across his throat. But as for sounds or scents, he might have been alone in the world. The place was empty. He gazed along the line of the ridge, his eyes blinking rapidly to hold his focus. There seemed to be no tracks, no signs of life of any shape or size, or was that . . .

He peered again, closer, more intently at a distant pine where, on one of the lower branches, there was indeed a shape. At first dark, blurred, almost shapeless and unmoving, but there was something. He padded softly towards it. The shape moved. Was it Alom? Chalon's stride lengthened until he was almost into a trot.

'Not so fast, my good friend,' called the shape. 'That was a stiff climb. Take it easy. There's no hurry.'

Now the shape had turned and Chalon could recognise the outline of a squirrel, his tail curled high into his neck,

his red coat glowing, tufted ears erect and primed for every sound and movement about him. Alom's eyes gleamed a welcome.

'Well, I must say I'm glad to see you,' he said, moving down a branch to be nearer Chalon. 'We knew you were coming, but I suppose you've seen what happened at the drey. Damn near a massacre, I don't mind telling you, but we've survived, or at least some of us have.'

'I'm really very sorry . . . ' began Chalon.

'Oh, I know how you feel. I understand,' said Alom. 'It happens. We all run the same risks. Life on one day, death on the next, but we shall fight on, never fear.'

'We saw the Men,' said Chalon. 'They were heading deeper into the woodland.'

Alom scratched his left ear. 'Crazy lot. Some of the worst. However . . . Where's the Whiteface?'

'At the drey,' said Chalon.

'Hmmm,' mused the squirrel. 'Not so sure about that. She could be in danger, you know.'

'Yes, of course, I must get back to her immediately. Are you coming?'

'Certainly,' said Alom. 'The least I can do is try to make you welcome for the night.'

He was about to leap to the ground when a crash and scattering of snow to their left severed the silence like a scream.

'What the . . . ' began Alom, then made the leap to the ground as a grey squirrel slithered to a halt by the pine tree trunk.

'Alom! Alom!' hissed the squirrel, his eyes rolling, breath pounding from his body. 'You've got to come!'

'What's happened?'

'The hunters! They're back at the drey!'

Chalon felt a long slither of chill begin deep in his stomach and edge like a slow flood towards his bowels.

'They're there now,' said the grey squirrel, collapsing against the tree. 'The same hunters . . . the same group.'

They've taken the Whiteface!

'Killed her?' asked Alom.

'No . . . no, not killed her. Taken her. They've netted her. They're dragging her away.'

'The coat,' squirmed Alom. 'The white coat. That'll be the prize they want.'

Chalon's head reeled as the words drenched him and set his body trembling. 'We must go . . . now!' he croaked.

'No, wait!' shouted Alom. 'They won't kill her, not yet. They'll take her to the village. They'll pen her there until . . . ' He leapt back on to the branch. 'We must organise, quickly.' He turned to the grey squirrel. 'Get back to the drey as fast as you can. Tell everyone to be ready by dusk.'

'Ready?' gasped the squirrel. 'Ready for what?'

'To head for the village.'

'You mean . . . you mean *we're* going *there*?'

'We most certainly are. Tonight!'

Chalon only half heard the words, only half listened, was only half aware of where he was, who he was, as the images of the Whiteface being dragged away by the hunters drifted through his mind like a sickening haunting.

Dusk came, limp and lifeless, and night settled around Chalon without his being conscious of the change. His world and thoughts had darkened on the ridge and he knew nothing of the descent to the drey, the dash through the snow, the speed with which Alom began to organise the journey to the village. He heard voices, saw bodies, was aware of the jangle of movement about him, but once into the drey beneath the trees where the Whiteface had waited he could only stare at the scuffed snow, the footprints of the Men, the faint imprint of the net, a few specks of blood, and listen deep in his innermost mind to the echoing whine of the vixen.

How was it that she had fallen prey to the hunters? Why had she not run, hidden herself, called out? What had so

bewitched and bewildered her that she had stayed, almost without movement it seemed, and been so easily taken? Chalon could find no answers. Only his fear overwhelmed him . . . fear for the vixen's life, fear now that the worst would happen, that the south and The Singing Tree would be as dreams; fear that in the days to come he would wander aimlessly, without purpose, without hope.

'Now this is the plan,' said Alom, coming to him beneath the tree. 'I can understand your feelings, but you must listen, pay attention and help.'

Chalon turned to him. 'Yes – yes, of course. I'm sorry. You must forgive me. It's just that . . .'

'I know,' consoled Alom, 'but simply staring and doing nothing isn't going to solve anything. We've got to reach the village before the moon is up. And that means moving quickly. There's not a second to lose.' He glanced around him. 'There's a score of grey squirrels ready to accompany us. Three have already left. They'll scout the path ahead and warn of any danger, but their principal task is to establish exactly where the Whiteface is being held. As soon as they know, they'll report back. Meanwhile, we must be on our way. Our path must be as direct as we can make it. We'll skirt the lower reach of the ridge, then risk crossing open country to the stream. The dale and the village are just beyond it. We'll see the Men's fires long before we get close to their huts, and must trust to our luck that they've not posted guards. They normally do, but not until later – and it's my guess they'll be feasting well tonight. Very well.' He flicked a paw at his ear. 'Ready? Then let's be off.'

'But what are we to do when we reach the village?' asked Chalon, padding at his side. 'How can we begin to plan a rescue? The odds are enormous.'

'On the face of it, I agree,' said Alom. 'But I have an idea. If the vixen is penned, as I suspect she is, then there's just a chance, slender enough, but a chance all the same.'

'You believe they're holding her, but for what?'

'They'll prize her coat more than her flesh,' said Alom, bluntly. 'The hunting's been good today, but the white coat will fetch a welcome supply of skins and food among their own kind. My guess is they'll try trading the White-face for whatever they need among the Stone Men.'

'The Stone Men? Who are they?' asked Chalon.

'You won't have heard of them. They live along the edge of the lake, at the foot of the mountains. They are horse-men, owners of the only herd in this area, which gives them a superior standing, but they're not a bad lot by Men standards, fairly peaceful and very skilful when it comes to hunting. Chances are they would put as high a price on the white coat as the Men of the dale.' He skipped lightly over a fallen branch. 'Anyway, we must hope that's the intention. If it isn't . . . ' He came to a halt. 'Let's look on the bright side and keep moving. I'll go on ahead now, if you don't mind. I make faster progress aloft than I do on the ground. I'll meet up with you at the end of the ridge. Just keep moving, straight ahead.'

Chalon watched the squirrel leap high into the trees, then padded on, quickening his own pace until his legs and shoulders were working in perfect unison, urging his body forward, covering the ground like a breeze-bothered wisp of mist. Something of Alom's determination and enthusiasm had reached into him; perhaps, after all, there was a chance. If the vixen was alive, they would *make* the chance of her escape. How, he could not begin to imagine, or at what cost, but if it meant forsaking his own life, then he would do so. He knew that now. He knew, felt and was consumed by that single passion – the vixen's freedom, at whatever price, in her bid to reach the south.

He went easily over a scramble of rock where the snow had barely settled, jumped a dead tree trunk and hardly slowed his pace through a tangle of hawthorn and nettle. The early night had deepened, but the moon not yet

broken. The sky slept like a black, closed eye – and, thankfully, there was no breeze to carry their scent ahead of them. If they could reach the edge of the village before the moonlight; if their luck could hold . . . He quickened his pace again, leaving the woodland behind him and heading directly for the last of the snow-tipped outcrops of the ridge.

Alom was in deep conversation with two grey squirrels when Chalon finally reached the open ground. He joined them, panting heavily, his breath curling from his open mouth like a clamour of white fingers.

‘Any news?’ he asked, anxiously.

‘A good deal,’ said Alom, turning to him. ‘The vixen is alive – and penned, as I thought. The Men have her in some sort of cage on the northern side of the village, under guard, of course, but nothing like as close to their huts as I’d feared. So that’s a help to begin with. Apparently there is only one guard, or at least there was only one. Things may have changed by the time we get there.’

‘But how is she?’ asked Chalon. ‘Did she say anything? Did anyone get close to her?’

‘Not close enough to speak to her, but she doesn’t seem to be harmed, wounded, or anything like that. She’s simply sitting there. Not much else she can do.’

‘What now, then?’ said Chalon, padding round the group. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘I need a little time,’ said Alom. ‘Not long, just sufficient to organise. I’m going on alone now. You can head for the village, but I must urge you not to attempt to approach the pen. You must promise. The slightest hint of your presence and we’re beaten before we begin. Do I have your word?’

‘You have it,’ said Chalon.

‘I know it will be difficult for you, but my whole strategy depends on stealth and silence – and not being seen.’

‘Are you going to try . . .’

‘I am not going to try anything,’ said Alom. ‘There are

others far better equipped than I to make the attempt at freeing the vixen, but that need not concern you. Reach the village, stay out of sight and be ready to run when the vixen is free. You can keep her in your sight, but that is all. Stay away from the pen.' He stared deeply into Chalon's eyes. 'It is in everyone's heart, my friend, that your journey is far from complete, but we know of your visit to Briggan, of the placing of the stone, of all that has been foretold by the elders. The Whiteface *must* reach the south – and she shall. It is the destiny of each and every one of us.'

He went back to his conversation with the squirrels, but spoke now in the softest of whispers.

The first lift of the moon had broken the darkness of the night sky by the time Chalon had reached and crossed the narrow stream and was able to nose and collect the scent of the village. The high glow of the Men's fires marshalled the few surrounding trees and scrub above the snowline into deep silhouettes whose shadows seemed almost to stride across the white landscape. He had slowed his pace at the scent; now, with the sounds of the village – the voices of Men, crackle of their fires, strange rattlings of their life – he went still slower, belly close to the ground, eyes and ears primed to the finest edge of his instincts.

He hugged shadows where they gave him cover; paused behind scrub where its height hid him from casual sight, but moved constantly, deliberately northwards, slipping like something born of the darkness itself to where he could already sense the Whiteface was penned. Only once did he notice any squirrels, and then at a distance, far ahead of him. He could see nothing of what they were doing, save that their stares were concentrated on the village. If their duty was simply that of watching, then their eyes missed nothing.

He rounded a taller clump of scrub, slid between a line of trees and emerged before a roughly woven reed fence, leaning heavily under a drift of snow. He nosed gently,



softly. She was there! Almost within reach of his paw, on the other side of the fence. He crept into its shadow, coming as close to the fence as he dared, then moved stealthily along it until he reached a break, the merest head's width opening through which he was able to peer. He saw the pen, the lashed wooden stakes of its wall, floor and roof, its tight, miserable shape, its blackness within the shadows of a hut, the bulk of the guard. . . and then the vixen, her white coat, the sadness in her eyes, the fear behind them, the shiver in her flanks and twitch at her jowls.

He began instinctively to edge forwards, wanting and needing to reach her, to tear savagely at the pen, but he had given his word to Alom. He would stay silent. He settled in the snow, his stare fixed on the Whiteface, watching her every movement, willing her to life and hope.

Chalon lay until the cold had eaten deep into his body

and his coat began to stiffen in the fingering grip of frost, but still he stared, waiting, watching. The guard strolled back and forth without a glance in his direction, hugging his skins to him against the bite of the night cold. The Man had no real heart for his task and was eager to greet the shape that came towards him from the glow of the fires. Chalon's gaze shifted to take in the new arrival, someone much smaller, lighter, who moved slowly and with effort.

The girl! The girl with the stunted foot and white hair he had seen in the woodland. She greeted the guard then passed to the pen and knelt before it. Her eyes glowed, but not with any joy of happiness, thought Chalon, for they were wet with tears that lay on her cheeks like dead ice.

Fourteen

Would the girl see him; would her gaze move the vital fraction beyond the pen to the gap in the fence; would there be just enough light from the glow of the fires for her to make out the shape of his head, catch the gleam in his eyes?

Chalon dared not move, neither blink nor breathe deeper than was necessary. He watched the girl, her every movement, the lift of a finger, flicker of an eyelid, but her concentration did not waver from the vixen. She simply stared at the Whiteface, her lips moving through inaudible words. Then, almost as quickly as she had knelt at the pen, she stood upright, brushed the tears from her cheeks, smiled at the guard and hobbled away to the fires. The guard went back to his pacing, and Chalon breathed deeply again.

The vixen had not moved. Only the shivering in her flanks, the wisps of breath from her mouth, were proof that there was still life. Chalon's urge to reach her deepened. How much longer must he wait? When would something, anything, happen? He was conscious of a sound, no more than a soft swish in the snow to his left, then of another close to it. His head turned slowly, his eyes widening. There was something, a faint shape – a squirrel coming closer, turning, pausing a moment, moving on. He was joined by a second, a third, all three in line, approaching the fence like an advance patrol.

Chalon peered again, this time still deeper into the dark-

ness until he could see a dozen, a score of smaller shapes, black against the snow. Mice. There was an army of them crossing the snowscape from the cover of scrub. They went like a cascade of stones rolled from a bag, silently, almost without shadows, directed so quickly by the squirrels he barely had a chance to see the last of them disappear beneath the fence. But where were they heading, he wondered, and what were they supposed to be doing? Were they some part of Alom's plan?

His gaze returned to the pen where the vixen still sat motionless, her stare settled on the fires, yet seeming to reach far beyond the flames, back to the open country, the woodland; perhaps to the sett, Briggan, the warmth of the chamber and mysterious silence of the place of the stones. So intense were her thoughts, so distant her stare, she was totally unaware of the sudden gathering of bodies in one corner of the pen. A dozen mice passed through the bars and scattered like dust, each to a separate bar where it began to gnaw frantically at the dried reed lashing that held it in place.

So that was the plan! The mice would attempt to loosen each bar, and then . . . But how would the vixen know when to move? More mice entered the pen, dispersed and began work. Chalon gazed anxiously at the guard. He must not hear, not see! But there was faint chance of anything disturbing his efforts at keeping warm. He simply passed to and fro, tugging at his skins, blowing into his hands, beating his arms across his body. A party of four mice had already gnawed through a lashing and had set about the one next to it. Now Chalon could follow the skill of the operation. It was a systematic strategy to loosen the bars at the back of the pen, the side furthest from the guard and in the deepest shadow. Once they were free of their bottom and centre lashings, the vixen would be able to push her way through them with ease. But again, wondered Chalon, how was she to know? Would someone tell her? Should he

warn her of what was happening?

He fidgeted in the snow, shifting his limbs for the first time since reaching the fence. He was beginning to stiffen. He had lost the sense in his paws and what little blood flowed seemed only to course through his head and behind his eyes. He had to move, be ready to run when the vixen was free. He flicked his brush gently, felt his hindlegs gain a purchase on the iciness beneath them, hold and then heave his flanks from the snow. He came upright like a drifting spirit from some deep uncovered grave, but there was no sound, not so much as a whisper from the snow as it broke under his weight.

When he was standing he took the single step that brought him to within a touch of fur of easing his head through the gap. Now he was ready; now he could call to the vixen the moment she was free. He began to shiver, with the cold, his mounting excitement, or was it fear? There was another movement to his left, a faster, deeper swish as Alom came into view. The red squirrel paused, glanced around him and reached Chalon's side in two short leaps.

'Patience, my friend, patience,' he whispered. 'We have almost won.'

'But how . . . ' began Chalon.

'Silence, please. Be content to wait.'

They stared at the mice darting, scrambling, teeming in a seemingly chaotic circus around the bars, yet slowly, painstakingly loosening each one with a co-ordination of strength, teeth and speed which set Chalon's eyes reeling. But still the vixen stared ahead of her. Would she never turn? Surely she must have heard something by now?

Chalon felt Alom at his side, the touch of his paw.

'Someone's coming,' hissed the squirrel.

Chalon's eyes flashed to where the white-haired girl was once again hobbling her way from the fires to the pen. Why – why did she have to choose this moment to return! She

reached the guard, passed him and came on to the front of the pen where, as before, she knelt down. She stared intently at the Whiteface, then slowly her eyes narrowed, her head moving slightly to one side, a hand falling to the snow to support her weight. She had seen the mice! Not one of the bodies on the bars had moved at her approach, but the girl's keen sight had detected them. How many – one, two, all of them, wondered Chalon? Would she call to the guard? The girl stood up, turned and stumbled away, passing the guard without a word, heading for the largest of the huts by the side of the main fire.

'She'll warn the Men!' snapped Alom. 'Damn it!'

The mice were already at work again, but there was still one bar to be freed.

'Quickly!' hissed Alom, moving through the gap to the pen, waving his paws at the mice.

The vixen spun round at the sound, her eyes shining like black stars. Her movement attracted the guard who had already taken two steps towards the pen when the sudden rush and roar of flame at his back halted him.

'The hut!' shouted Alom. 'The hut – it's alight!'

Chalon's heart leapt and thudded at the sight of the surging mass of flames, the sudden screams and shouts of the Men, the dash of bodies, clamouring of limbs. The hut the girl had entered burned like a collapsed sun, the flames licking viciously at the night sky. Had she deliberately set it alight?

'Now!' shouted Alom again – and made one frenzied leap at the pen.

The bars and lashings gave way in a tangled heap, the vixen sprang forward and scrambled to the fence, headlong into Chalon's chest.

'I can't believe . . . ' she panted.

'No time! No time!' screamed Alom at the top of his voice. 'Run! You must run!'

Chalon tugged at the vixen's coat, pulling her round and

away from the fence.

'Follow me!'

He raced along the side of the fence then veered to the right, towards the open country and the distant sprawl of a moonlit copse. He could hear the thud of the vixen's paws on the packed snow, feel the heat of her breath on his back, see the gleam of joy in her eyes – and beyond her the frantic curl of flames climbing ever higher, silhouetting the shape of the white-haired girl, her arms waving wildly in what Chalon knew deep in his heart to be the sheer delight of a fond farewell.

They ran as though caught in the teeth of a wind. Where there were drifts of deep snow, they leapt them; where plateaux of ice threatened to send them skidding to oblivion, they held to them with paws and claws that scratched and scrambled for the slightest grip; where there were rocks, stones, the jagged jaws of frozen driftwood, they skirted them, swinging to left and right then ahead like the searching eye of a hurricane, and when the land was open, smooth under the snow, they hurtled on as though possessed, heads down, belly fur brushing the tips of new frost, their single objective the copse, their fear whatever lay behind them, dancing in the flames.

The vixen kept pace, never once slipping more than a whisker behind Chalon's surging shoulders. She made no sounds, save to whine like a cub when a particularly sharp rock dug at her flank, nor did she shift her gaze from the huddle of trees in the distance. It was enough that she was free; that she could run, begin the journey again, and that Chalon was there.

They reached the copse in a slithering shimmer of snow and plunged, slid and finally collapsed in bundles of steaming fur in the deepest hollow. The vixen fell across Chalon's back and even before she had righted herself was licking at his neck, her whole body throbbing with her

freedom and relief from the nightmare of the pen.

'I still can't believe . . . ' she murmured. 'It seems impossible. How . . . how did you . . . '

Chalon struggled to all-fours and calmed her. 'Never mind how, you are free, that is all that matters.'

The vixen rolled through the snow, came upright and shook herself vigorously. 'The girl – the girl with the strange foot. I saw her. Did she help?'

'She must have,' said Chalon, and told her of Alom's plan, the arrival of the mice and of how the girl had interrupted their work at the bars. 'She just strolled away to the hut,' he went on, 'and the next thing we knew it was a mass of flames.'

'But why?' asked the vixen. 'Why did the girl Man do such a thing?'

'She is different,' said Chalon.

'Like me,' said the vixen, sharply. 'She is mutant. She too has deeper feelings. We are all the same.'

Chalon did not answer. There seemed to be none in those moments of watching the vixen come to life again, her coat already gleaming whiter than the snow in the moonlight. He turned quickly and padded back to the edge of the copse, the vixen in his steps.

'Will the Men follow?' asked the Whiteface.

'I doubt it. Not until dawn.'

'And what of Alom?'

'We must wait and see. He will come this way, I am sure. He will follow in our tracks.'

They sat in silence for a moment.

'I was a fool to be trapped at the drey,' said the vixen, quietly, without looking at Chalon. 'It was my own fault.'

He stared at her, but said nothing.

'I knew the hunters were returning. I could hear them. I wanted to move, knew I must, but could not. I . . . I wanted to see the girl again.' The vixen eased her belly to the snow. 'I wanted to look into her eyes.'

'And did you?' asked Chalon.

'Perhaps. I'm not sure. She was with the Men. I saw her. She may have seen me, but I could not move. I simply lay there – and then it was too late. The net was over me before I knew what had happened.'

'But the girl did not desert you,' said Chalon.

'No, she came back, didn't she? Came back to help.' The vixen released a long, trembling breath. 'I think we needed to see each other clearly – perhaps to understand.'

Chalon placed a paw on her neck. 'I think you did,' he said, then gazed at the glow far beyond them.

He could still see the tips of the flames above a pall of smoke, hear the sounds of the Men, but there was no sight, no scent of Alom and the squirrels.

'The darkness will seem long,' he said. 'But we must wait.' He padded into the deeper snow of the open country and nosed gently. 'You must rest. Try to sleep.'

But the Whiteface had already closed her eyes.

There was the faintest shimmer of first light as Chalon padded along the perimeter of the copse, following in the tracks he had made through the night. The vixen still slept, smoke still curled from the village, but now there were no flames and no sounds, save those of a piping bird far away in the woodland. He halted, nosed the air again and waited for the scent of squirrel. Still nothing. Would there ever be, he wondered? Had Alom and his party returned to their drey; had they been hunted down by the Men?

He turned his tired eyes to the horizon. It was difficult now to focus, to keep anything in clear sight for more than a few moments. Perhaps his hunger had weakened him; perhaps he needed to sleep; perhaps the Season, the cold, the effort, perhaps all of these and the journey had . . .

He stiffened. He had seen a movement – far away, no more it seemed than the shift of a stone, but a shape moving across the snow. He peered deeper, took a few

steps forward. It was there again, growing, still moving. He nosed. Now he had it – squirrels. He waited patiently until the group had moved closer, then weakened the vixen.

‘They’re here,’ he whispered.

The vixen woke instantly and joined him on the edge of the copse.

Slowly, like the inching of a shy shadow, the group reached them; two grey squirrels leading, two bringing up the rear of the party, three struggling through the snow between them, but no sign of Alom.

‘We thought . . .’ began Chalon, but fell silent when he saw that four of the seven squirrels were cut and bleeding, their coats splattered with blood already clotting in the colder wind.

‘Where is Alom?’ asked Chalon.

The party halted.

‘He is not with us,’ said the stouter of the grey squirrels.

‘He will not be returning to the drey.’

‘Why?’ asked the vixen. ‘What has happened?’

‘Alom is dead. He died in the village.’

Chalon’s fur bristled beneath a chill in his bones. ‘How?’ he croaked.

‘There was much fighting after you fled. The hunters . . . they turned everywhere, on anything. Most of us escaped, but Alom stayed to help the mice. He had no chance when the Men came. They clubbed him to death in front of us. Alom is no more.’

The wind slid among the gathering like an iced hand.

‘I do not know what to say,’ said Chalon. ‘How can I . . .’

‘There is nothing to say,’ said the grey squirrel. ‘It is our fate. Alom has gone, but lived well and fulfilled his life as he would have it.’

‘And the girl?’ asked the vixen. ‘What of her?’

‘I saw her only once, at the edge of the village, staring

into the night. Wishing you well, I suspect.' The squirrel paused. 'After your escape, Alom spoke briefly to us as though he knew he would not be returning. He sent a message. He said you are to travel westwards. You must reach the end of the dale and turn for the mountains. When you reach the lake you are to wait for the stag, Valdar. He will come.' Again the wind slid among them. 'Alom also asked that you undertake a small kindness for him. He asked that you place an acorn in the earth beneath the tallest tree in the south. It is a custom when one of our kind dies. When the seed grows, it will be known as Alom's tree.'

'Yes – yes, of course,' said Chalon.

'And now we must go. The woodland is still some distance. We are tired and there are those among us, as you see, in need of care. The Men may follow, but they are too busy for now with what remains of their village. You will have travelled far by the time they are in the mood for another hunt. And so, my friends, may the Season treat you well. May the sun guide you and bring you safely to your destination.'

Chalon and the vixen remained silent as the party moved away. They watched them until they were no more than a shimmer on the snow in the struggling dawn light, then turned westwards, into the wind.

Fifteen

Sunlight came and went, uncertain in the scud of fast cloud from the north. The wind deepened, at first skirmishing among the gaunt sticks of growth in the open country, whirling the looser snow to spirals, then settling to a steady howl, moaning among rocks and forcing Chalon and the vixen to trot with their heads down, shoulders hunched, legs working without cohesion against its strength.

Their turn westwards from the copse carried them across a short plain, into a spread of rolling country where the snow drifts deceived and fell to soft hollows and then, as the snow thinned and patches of frozen earth became visible, into the craggy outcrops of the slopes to distant hills. Progress was a frustrating mixture of high speed, where they could gain a firm foothold, slow scrambling and, as the wind forced them to halt to take their breath, of turning to see where they had been and if there was the slightest hint of their being followed. But they went alone.

Soon the pall of smoke from the village fire had disappeared; the ridge to the woodland was no more than a faint, diminishing blur, and the land emptied. Both Chalon and the vixen felt the need to eat, but neither could collect the scent of anything worth the chase. The occasional lick of snow sated their thirsts and smoothed the dryness in their throats, but the promise of food, if any, lay in the hills.

Noon passed in a smothering duskiness of half light and

it was mid afternoon before Chalon led the vixen into the shelter of taller rocks.

'We must rest and consider our position,' he said, quietly, anxious to hide his tiredness and the persistent shivering in his right flank. 'We may reach the hills by nightfall, but I cannot tell. The way ahead is difficult, and there is no clear sight of where exactly the hills begin.'

'We must cross them?' asked the vixen.

'I think so,' said Chalon. 'Beyond them will lie the lake and then the mountains.'

The vixen came to his side and leaned the weight of her body against his.

'You are exhausted,' she said, nuzzling at his jowl. 'Why don't you sleep? There are no Men, they have not followed. We are safe for the moment. Please, try to sleep.'

'Later,' replied Chalon, firmly. 'To sleep now would waste time. We are still in open country. There is too little cover. We must keep going, at least until nightfall.'

The vixen nuzzled again. 'But we can rest for a while.' She shifted her body still closer, lifting her weight from him but keeping her blood warmth at his coat.

They sat in silence for a moment.

'It was my fault Alom died,' said the vixen, suddenly. 'I cannot forgive myself for that.'

'Alom did what any of us would have done,' said Chalon, conscious now of the new warmth in him. 'And he did not die disappointed. You were free. He saw that. His plan worked.'

'But the price was his death.'

'I too was willing to pay that price,' said Chalon.

The vixen stared at him. 'You would have died for me to go free?'

'Yes.'

'Why – why would you have given your life for mine?'

Chalon hesitated. The wind lifted the fur on his neck.

'Because . . . ' but the words did not form. His voice faltered and died.

'You do not have to answer,' said the vixen. 'I can see and feel the reason why.'

Chalon looked at her, watching the blackness of her eyes. 'You feel many things. You must know many things too.'

The vixen rested her head against his. 'Many things,' she said, softly, her eyes alight.

They fell to silence again and listened to the wind.

Their route from the rock shelter continued westwards. Now the snow was little more than streaks, frozen hard and needle sharp beneath a careless paw, but there was a track to follow. Chalon had nosed carefully in the hope of perhaps detecting life, the passage of a rabbit, vole, rat, only to be daunted at every turn; the land was as empty as ever. He found that difficult to understand. There was growth – there were fingerings of dead trees, clutches of nettles, even grass – yet no signs of habitation. Nor, he noticed, were there any birds. The sky was low and heavy, churning under the rush of the wind, but even where there was light nothing flew, nothing called. The only sound was that of the wind. Was this a dead country, he wondered, some area left barren and lifeless since the Great Death? Certainly it offered few comforts – sparse cover and only lean shelter – yet both hare and rabbit would have found it hospitable. Perhaps they lay further to the east, or closer to the foot of the hills. Or perhaps they did not come here at all.

He shivered, sensing the vixen turn to watch the shake in his flank, but he said nothing. Only sleep and food would help him. He quickened the pace in spite of the ache in his limbs and set his gaze firmly on the hills. The light would last until they reached them, he decided.

The wind had tended to deaden their sensitivity to

sound, so that the steady rumbling far to their right in the east came to Chalon and the vixen on the back of the howl, unheard when it should have been sensed, and then too late, like someone stealing up on them in leaden boots. They stopped as one, a foreleg raised, brushes stiffening, ears erect, eyes round and sharp, and turned their heads to face the sound.

They could see nothing, only the endless landscape through an early evening gloom that slid tenuously about them. They listened again, shutting out the wind and concentrating on the sounds beyond it. The rumbling persisted; rhythmic, deep and steady, as though the very rocks were being rolled towards them. The vixen nestled into Chalon's side as he lowered his body to the ground.

'Keep low,' he whispered.

They waited, watching, listening. The sound came on, seeming to climb from the slight dip behind the knoll. Chalon peered until his eyes ached, his muscles beginning to throb with an instinctive tightening in the presence of danger, but one he could not fathom.

'What is it?' said the vixen, her eyes half-closed against the whip of the wind.

'I cannot tell. I cannot see,' murmured Chalon, his stare deepening.

He had almost concluded it would be wiser to move when the rim of the knoll came to life with a surging, pounding mass of figures. Men! But these were not the hunters of the village. These Men were astride horses.

Chalon shivered, chilled to the marrow when he heard the crack of a whip and saw that the leading horseman controlled a pack of dogs – snarling, vicious brutes of multi-colours, shapes and breeds.

'Stone Men, hunters as they used to be,' said Chalon.

'But what are they doing?' whined the vixen.

'You will know soon enough when the dogs collect our scent!'

Chalon eased his belly from the ground. 'This hunt is as ancient as Man himself,' he said. 'The elders spoke of it. We must move. Our scent will travel to them. Quickly! Follow me and do not move from my side.'

'Do they mean to kill us?' asked the vixen.

'Tear us to shreds if they can! Now run for your life!'

It was a full minute before the dogs collected their scent; a full minute in which Chalon and the vixen were able to turn from the track they had been following and move off on a more southerly course.

Here the land shelved through a scattering of gorse and rough pebbled slopes, but the snow was thinner and their foothold would be firm. They would run parallel with the hills, Chalon had decided, making as much ground as possible before heading for what he thought was a sheerer range of rocks. There, luck willing, they might find a refuge. But for the moment only speed counted – speed and the skill he had heard told of by the dog fox, Wasden.

Chalon had risked no more than a fleeting backward glance at the pack and the horsemen, but it had been enough to confirm his worse fears. The party, numbering perhaps ten or a dozen Stone Men – taller, rangier than those of the dale; skin-clad and armed with spears – were undoubtedly main hunters, perhaps far from their lakeside home, but just as obviously familiar with the open ground and regular visitors to it in search of food. The leading horseman, whirling the whip high above his head and calling to his followers, was clothed in black skins, as black as his mount, so that he seemed to ride like a charging thundercloud. The pack, led by a smooth-coated, one-eyed brindle dog, moved and wheeled with a precision which said little for the chances of fleeing prey. The dogs were trained, disciplined and eager. Nothing would escape their keenness for a scent, and their pace would be such that simply to run would be pointless. They would have to be

out-manoevred.

But how, wondered Chalon, as the wind seared his eyes and his limbs burned with the effort of running? He glanced quickly at the vixen. She was at his shoulder, never more than a breath away, moving freely and easily, but there was no mistaking her fear. Once again Men had crossed her path, clambered into her life in the coldness of nightmare to chill her to the bone. Chalon could only hope that she did not panic, that she held to their course and obeyed his every movement. He lengthened his stride at the sound of the pack's lifting bay. The dogs had tracked their scent, winging to them on the wind, and reacted instinctively. The bid for life, and death, had begun . . .

Chalon veered slightly to the south, no more than the faintest turn which carried them down a gentle slope and into a trough. The snow was deeper, wetter, forcing them to slow their pace, but their momentum was steady and they mounted the slope on the opposite side with ease. It would not be so easy for the dogs, or the horsemen, thought Chalon.

They raced on, into open country again, heading now for what Chalon could make out to be an overgrown straggle of hawthorn, the last remnants of an ancient hedgerow. The wind howled in his ears, lifting the voices and memories of nights in the den . . .

'And when the hunt began,' he could hear Wasden saying, 'it always seemed to those who may have watched that Men and their dogs had all the advantage. They were many; the fox by himself. They were fresh; the fox probably tired. They were fed; the fox hungry and weaker. They chased; the fox ran, seeking his hideout, knowing that life was at its thinnest and might snap – just like that – at the instant of a wrong turn, misplaced paw, a thoughtless dash for cover. And yet . . . and yet . . . our kind too have their skills. Are we not fleeter than most; can we not collect a scent before it has so much as risen; do we not see the gap

where others see only a barrier; can we not move with a precision which allows us to pass where no dog, much less Man, would dream of going – but, more importantly, are we not ourselves hunters, is it not in our hearts and minds to pit our wits and guile against the natural world? Are we not, by any standards Men may know, survivors? These, my friends, are the balance in the hunt . . . '

The memories faded, the voices drifted away on the rush of the wind. Survivors, thought Chalon. It was true, they were, but could not the odds be so heavily against strength of will that not even death was an alternative?

The hawthorn was within reach, but it would not serve as cover. It was too obvious; a lethal trap. But if, on the other hand . . .



Chalon urged the vixen forward. 'Make for the hedge,' he called. 'Find its centre and move along it as fast as you can. When we reach the end, wait for the pack to run its length. I

assure you they will, then turn back – back along the same path and out of the hedge at the point we entered. Do you understand?’

‘I understand,’ said the vixen:

They plunged into the thicket and were almost immediately blinking in the sulky darkness of damp branches and ageing growths of mildew. The surface was soft and spongy, making it difficult for them to secure a grip and still maintain their speed. They plunged on, the whine and bark of the pack moving closer like the tail-end whip of that winter’s wind. The earth thudded with the charge of the horsemen. Voices rose thunderously, but neither Man nor dog made any attempt to enter the tangle of growth.

Chalon led the vixen on, reached the farthestmost tip of the thicket, paused and began to pad back.

‘Move slowly,’ he murmured. ‘We must let the pack believe we are leaving by the obvious route.’

They could hear the dogs racing alongside them, their paws pounding on the earth, their breath curling like twisted tongues on the thin air, the sweat and strain of their bodies rising in a sweet, sickly odour that swished about them like a cloak.

‘Do not look. Simply move,’ urged Chalon.

The dogs passed them, hell-bent in a frenzy of lashing tails and slobbering jaws for the end of the hedge. Chalon paused again.

‘Wait,’ he whispered.

The vixen stopped, panting and near-exhausted at his side. They listened, watched.

‘Now!’ said Chalon, and bounded forward through the hedgerow and into the open country again, racing for the slopes of the hills as though spirited on the wind.

He did not need to look back to confirm the confusion among the hunters and their pack. Men reined and half-turned on their mounts, dogs clamoured back and forth, horses whinnied, voices rose and fell and groaned, while

the pack almost hissed its anger. There was a moment when neither Men nor dogs knew which way to turn, a moment which gave Chalon and the vixen the chance to plunge from the hedgerow and reach the first stony outcrops of the hillside.

'Are they following?' called the vixen at Chalon's shoulder.

'Not yet, but they will!'

They closed their ears to the howls and thuds as the sheerer run of rocks came into view. Which way now, wondered Chalon? He dared not risk slowing his pace; he could not afford to falter, to hesitate. He must enter the rock mounds wherever the first gap appeared. If it should prove a dead-end, so be it. There would be no second chance, no time to rethink before the pack was upon them. But for the next few moments, he had the initiative and all the advantage.

They scrambled over the stones, slipping and sliding on the still frozen surfaces, their paws losing a grip where pockets of snow collapsed beneath them. Thankfully, thought Chalon, his heart burning with effort, the light was almost gone. If he could find a gap, if he could reach it, enter it and slip deeper into the rocks, the darkness would act as a second cover. The Men might try searching, but the creep of night would soon deter them. The gap, the gap . . . there had to be one!

The vixen slithered to her belly, righted herself, and came on. Chalon dug his hindlegs deeper into the stones, lifting his body, willing it into action, to keep moving. He peered ahead, his eyes searching wildly for the slightest crevice, but the rock face seemed unbroken, an endless spread of grey.

The howls of the pack began to grow. There were only minutes left to them to find a way through.

The vixen turned suddenly to her right. 'This way!' she called.

Chalon plunged after her. It made no difference now which way they went – to left or to right, either way the odds of survival were the same.

‘There!’ called the vixen again. ‘Ahead of us. An opening!’

Chalon’s eyes gleamed. She was right. The gap seemed to be no more than a streak of darkness at this distance, thin as a hairline, but perhaps wide enough. The vixen reached it and squirmed through. Chalon followed, kicking his legs in a final effort to force his body onto a narrow ledge. He shook his head. Which way now?

But the vixen had already turned, this time to her left towards the entrance to a cave where, even as they approached, two eyes, shining in deep amber, stared at them.

Sixteen

Chalon shivered almost uncontrollably, his body suddenly racked with tiredness, effort, fear of what lay behind them and now, unmoving and shapeless in the darkness of the cave, what lurked in front of them.

The vixen backed, pushing her haunches into the rock face. She whined and scrambled a paw on Chalon's side. She too began to shiver, her ears flattening, fur bristling as the dogs flung themselves at the gap. But it was too narrow, too tight and too jagged for their bodies. A hunter probed a spear through it, urging the pack to follow, but to no avail. Only one dog, a whippet-like mongrel with a wedge-shaped head, succeeded in easing himself through the gap until his shoulders were held as though in the grip of a granite vice. And there he stayed, squirming, slobbering, riddled with the first pangs of panic yet clinging bravely to the instinct to hunt.

The Stone Men's leader cracked his whip and as it screamed on the frost-chilled air of dusk, so the eyes at the entrance to the cave moved forward. Chalon covered the vixen with his body, ready to lunge at whatever it was that watched them, ready to fight both it and any dog that should reach them to the very death. If this was to be their last bid for the south, if the quest for The Singing Tree was to end here, crouched in the cold slabbed coffin of the rock mound, then it would indeed *be* a fight, with no quarter . . .

'I wouldn't linger a second longer, if I were you,' said the voice. 'Have no fear, just follow me.'

The eyes faded, the entrance to the cave filled with darkness.

'Who was that?' murmured the vixen.

Chalon nosed, taking a step forward. 'Wild cat, I think,' he said.

'No one spoke of a wild cat. Shall we follow?'

'There doesn't seem much choice,' replied Chalon, shivering again. 'I'll go first.'

They moved forward, Chalon's paws padding lightly in soft steps, as fearful as they were uncertain.

'Give yourself a moment to adjust to the darkness, then keep moving,' said the voice ahead of them. 'But, please, do not hesitate. There is some way to go before we reach safety.'

They followed, surrounded almost immediately by a still deeper, heavier blackness through which it seemed they had to force their bodies.

The air was suddenly colder, damper, clinging to their faces, circling their eyes until the sockets ached. The passage ran straight and narrow, forcing them to single file, their coats brushing its walls, collecting droplets of acrid dampness; their paws sliding through what might have been a thin surface of slime, but they could see nothing of a recognizable shape, nothing that indicated how far ahead the passage ran, how high it was, if it widened or grew narrower. Worse, they could see nothing of whoever it was they were following.

The cat's scent had grown stronger and from it Chalon knew it to be a male, probably of great age and, judging by the sound of its footfalls ahead of them, of some considerable size and weight. He knew little of wild cats. They had always been a rarity, an elusive breed set apart from others of the kingdom, not given to companionship, neither seeking nor, it seemed, needing friendship. Their numbers had

diminished dramatically in the Great Death, and the few who had survived tended to roam alone, making their homes in the hills as far from habitation as possible. You did not seek the company of wild cat, except at your peril, for his prowess as a hunter was matched only by his meanness as a host. The wild cat always preferred his own company. Your arrival merely revived his interest in satisfying his hunger.

Chalon felt the vixen nose his shoulder.

'We are not being followed,' she whispered. 'The dogs have not found a way through the gap.'

Chalon primed his ears. The sounds of the pack were distant and growing fainter; only the crack of the whip carried to them like the snap of lightning. They had been fortunate to find the gap when they had – or had that been luck, he wondered? The vixen had been so certain that the opening lay where it did. She had known instinctively – or been guided.

'But where are we going now?' she asked. 'Can you see anything – anything at all?'

'Nothing,' said Chalon. 'We must trust to the cat.'

'Can you trust him?'

'We shall know the answer to that soon enough.'

They padded on, beginning now to turn as the passage eased gently to the left. The surface was firmer and drier; the drip of moisture from the walls slower and softer, and for the first time Chalon could begin to decipher shapes. The walls were smooth, grey and astonishingly cold, as though sheathed in a thin film of invisible frost. He could see only a few feet ahead of him, still not far enough to make out the cat, but he could scent him and hear him – loping heavily, then stopping, loping again and waiting.

Occasionally, Chalon caught the drift of the cat's warm breath and imagined him standing, mouth open, watching them through his amber eyes which, for him at least, were as sunlight in the depths of the cave. Or was it a cave? The

passage seemed too precise to lead to no more than a dead-end chamber, and Chalon was sure they had passed the cooler draught from a passage leading off to the right. If so, if there had been another route they might have taken, then they had entered a new world beneath the lower reaches of the hills. This passage could be one of many, a complete labyrinth stretching for miles. Other passages would lead into higher and lower chambers, some to the surface, some still deeper to where underground streams ran black and ice-cold. Such a hideout would be secure against anything on the outside; dark, safe and undetected by all save those who might stumble across it by accident. Perhaps the wild cat had done so. Perhaps he had travelled from the north and somehow, in an effort to be free of the dangers of the Stone Men, sought out this place as a refuge. Only he would know the way in – and only he the way out.

Chalon's flank was caught in a sudden spasm of shivering and his stomach began to crease with the nagging ache of hunger. Food and sleep – he needed both if he were to survive the night.

'Prepare to climb,' said the voice, far ahead of them. 'We are going higher. The slope is quite steep, but your paws should hold to it. And then we are almost there.'

Chalon caught the single flash of the amber eyes, and could have sworn they mirrored the wild cat's thin smile.

They reached the slope almost before the cat's words had faded. It began gently, a slow, pitted climb where it was easy enough to find and hold to a grip, but the passage also began to narrow, so that Chalon's shoulders slid along the walls as though passing through a tube. The ceiling was lower, forcing his head to sink to his chest and his eyes to lift in the effort of seeing ahead. He could feel the vixen close on his hindlegs, her nose touching his flank, her breath warm and hurried on his haunches. But he still

could not see the wild cat; still only collect his scent and hear the thicker pad of his paws.

They continued to climb steadily, hardly aware of the incline sharpening, the walls closing in and their bodies sinking to the floor. Chalon was concerned that the struggle would be too much for him and that this last call on the already sagging strength in his limbs would finally break his will. Finding the energy to place one paw in front of the other had become a supreme effort; to continue to do so without knowing where he was going, what he was going to, or who was leading him, would be almost impossible. And then he collected a new scent – fresher, sharper, tingling like a sprinkling of ice on the tip of his nose. Air – clean and frosty, night air, and not far away.

He peered ahead. the darkness was as thick and unyielding as ever, but there was the faintest glow, no more than a smear of greyness which might, he thought, be moonlight. Were they about to emerge from the rock mound and find themselves on its other side? Would the dogs and Stone Men be waiting? He listened carefully. There was no sound of the wild cat. Either he had stopped far ahead of them, or taken another turning. Chalon forced his limbs to work, thrusting his shoulders against the walls of the passage until the fur on them lay flat and the sharper nodules of rock rubbed against his flesh. Now the incline was sharper, tipping him backwards until his hindlegs were taking his full weight. He was almost standing on the vixen's nose. He felt her back off to give him more room to thrust and scramble for a surface. There seemed nothing to hold on to; not a crack, not a trace of a splintering where he might lodge a claw.

He flung his forelegs sideways, grappling for a hold on the walls, wedging himself in the passage like a marooned mound of flesh and bone. He caught his breath, let his tongue loll loosely from his mouth, then heaved forward,

fighting every inch of the way to climb higher . . . and still higher until it seemed he was climbing through the very heart of a giant rock-tree. He struggled again, a second time, a third, squirming for movement, any movement from any part of his body which eased him higher. His right foreleg thrust ahead – and fell into open space. Whatever it was they were climbing, he had reached its rim. He paused, caught his breath again, and made what he knew would be his last effort.

He heaved – and slid from the passage onto an open surface like a newborn from the womb. He turned instantly, seeking to help the vixen. He saw a paw, then the tip of her head, the fur on her neck, reached for the scruff with his jaws, took a hold and brought her, gasping and panting, to his side.

‘Sorry you had to make such an effort, but there really was no other way,’ said the cat at their backs.

Chalon and the vixen turned from the rim and stared into a sweeping vista of the starlit night where a pale moon was lifting like an eye on the far horizon. They were still in the rock mound, but high above the landscape in a cavern larger than any Chalon had ever seen, one side of which was completely open. And it was from there, seated on the very edge of the opening, his eyes gleaming, the mound of his body casting a thick shadow across the floor, that the wild cat watched them.

‘This is my home,’ he said, quietly. ‘Quite safe, as you can see. Almost impenetrable, in fact. And perfect for watching the world go by – and keeping an eye on those fools below.’ His whiskers twitched. ‘I suppose you must be exhausted. I saw most of the hunt. I just happened to be in search of a spot of supper, and saw it all. Most intriguing. I thought for a moment you weren’t going to make it, but that dodge at the hedgerow – that really fooled them! Most commendable. I congratulate you.’

Chalon and the vixen remained motionless, their breath

still pounding through their bodies, limbs throbbing with the effort, exhaustion and now a tension they found difficult to release.

'But, of course,' the cat went on, 'I could see what was going to happen, so I thought I'd better be on hand when needed. Hope you don't mind.'

'No,' said the vixen, 'it was very kind of you.'

'Not at all. I personally loathe the Stone Men, and as for their dogs . . . ' He spat viciously. 'Still, all that's behind us now. Let me introduce myself. I'm Sugg – and you, I know, are travelling south.'

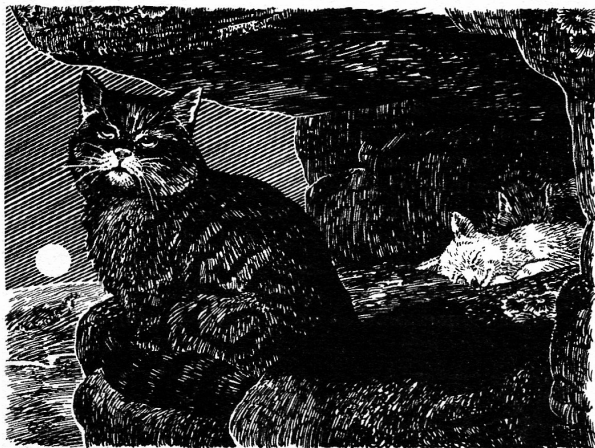
Chalon stiffened. 'How do you know?' he asked, wheezing.

'Ah, now that's interesting. I'm not much of a one for busying myself with the affairs of others – in fact, I rarely bother to speak to anyone at all these days – but the news of your journey precedes you, my friends. I heard of it from a rabbit who'd heard it from another, who in turn . . . but the story is endless. Suffice it to say that just about everyone seems to have heard of you – not surprising, of course. We all knew it would happen one day, as you've doubtless been told, but I must say it's something of a privilege to be involved and to have served in the cause. I'm proud of that.' The whiskers twitched again as the cat straightened his back. 'But now you must eat and sleep. I'm not much of a sleeper – I seem to need less and less as I grow older – but do make yourselves comfortable wherever pleases you. The place is dry, if a little draughty. There's food in the corner and I shan't disturb you until dawn, then we can have a real talk and discuss what's to be done.'

'Have the hunters gone?' asked the vixen, tiredly.

'Oh, they'll have given up long ago. I suppose they're not such a bad lot, really, but they will insist on that foolish hunting – so primitive, and so noisy. I honestly wonder how they expect to catch anything. But they never learn. Now, please, eat and then sleep. Goodnight.'

He turned from them and stared into the night.



Chalon's sleep was fitful, a twitching, twisting series of drifts into dozing and dreaming, then waking with a start and wondering where he was, who he was, what had happened, until his mind whirled and he dozed again, only to wake moments later and nuzzle the vixen who slept so soundly nothing disturbed her.

They had eaten well, almost until their eyes were closing with the effort, but the ache in Chalon's limbs had not eased, and slowly, like the grip of frost on a branch, he could feel them stiffening. It would be days, he knew, before he was fit enough to continue the journey. He stirred again and lifted his head to gaze at the wild cat still seated at the very edge of the cavern, still staring into the night, watching every movement, catching every sound from wherever it came.

Once again their good fortune had held, thought Chalon. Sugg meant them no harm – in fact, quite the opposite. He would no doubt prove invaluable in guiding them over the

hills to the lake. All that was needed was time . . . time to rest and to sleep.

He came slowly to all-fours and padded lightly to Sugg's side. The cat turned his head to him.

'Restless, my friend?' he asked.

'Too tired, I suppose,' said Chalon.

'Too intent on your journey.'

Sugg went back to his staring.

'The Whiteface is very beautiful,' he said. 'She is the first I have seen. Quite beautiful. Worthy of all our dreams.'

Chalon did not answer. He had never thought of the vixen like that – or had he, he wondered?

Sugg released a long sigh. 'It is good that she travels. Good for all of us. We need to believe, my friend. It is the fount of our life.' He blinked. 'But not without some effort, I'm sure. You will know that well enough. And I think more trouble waits for you not far away.'

'Oh?' said Chalon. 'Where?'

'Down there. Look closely and you will see a broader drift of rock leading to a clump of trees. See it?'

'Yes,' said Chalon, peering.

'In there, waiting for you, is another Whiteface. He's been there since we arrived. And not, I suspect, for the good of either of you. He's tracking you, no doubt.'

'I thought we'd left him far behind,' said Chalon, and told Sugg of how the pack had all but been massacred at the abbey.

'I see,' said Sugg. 'Well, you will do well to keep an eye on this survivor, my friend. He looks mean – and very hungry.'

Chalon felt a shiver break across his flank. 'I will do as you say,' he said, 'but perhaps it would be as well . . . '

'If we said nothing to the vixen?' said Sugg. 'I agree. We'll take care of this other Whiteface ourselves.'

Chalon stared at him. 'If you think we could.'

'I do indeed. As soon as possible.'

Seventeen

There was already a splay of soft sunlight across the cavern floor when Chalon woke again. He stirred slowly, the stiffness biting into his limbs, his body heavy and dull. He turned his gaze to the vixen, still deep in sleep, and then to the fullness of the morning beyond the cavern opening. The wind had dropped to leave the sky high and blue, and there was a new warmth in the frosty stillness. He could see the peaks of the distant hills, the mountain ranges beyond them, snow-tipped above the slopes of grey and purple rock. Somewhere, higher than the cavern, a hawk called, its cry echoing across the stone in a plaintive wail, but there were no other sounds – and no sight of Sugg.

Chalon came awkwardly to all-fours, his hindlegs scraping for a hold. He shook himself and padded to the opening. Now he could see the landscape below; the broad sweep of plain, dips of the dale to what he thought was a shimmer of twisting river; the copses, spinneys, outcrops of rough growth; meandering, unkempt hedgerows, dim outlines of what had once been fields and pastures in the time long ago when Men had farmed; a landscape still streaked with snow but revealing itself again like a sleeper waking to the glare of the sun. He peered closer, searching for the drift of the rock where Sugg had seen the Whiteface, but now it was simply a quiet place in the shadows of a clump of trees. He eased himself to his haunches and stared without seeing.

It had come as a shock to hear that the Whiteface still followed. How had he succeeded in tracking them this far without being seen or scented, wondered Chalon? Had the Whiteface moved on a track far to the north, circling them, yet knowing exactly the route they would take? And what did he plan now? Did he still believe in the need to stop the vixen travelling on; could it still be in his heart to kill?

Chalon turned his jowls to the sun's warmth, but could not control the shiver along his flank. If the Whiteface was intent on a killing; if, even alone and without the aid of the pack, he still believed it necessary to put an end to the vixen's bid for The Singing Tree, then Chalon would have to fight him. He shivered again. Such a fight might well be his last, for the Whiteface was younger, fitter, with a strength sharpened on hate and loneliness. There could be no doubt that the Whiteface would fight to the death. He had nothing to lose.

The sunlight glinted on Chalon's coat, steeping him in a lulling warmth that began to close his eyes, ease his breathing, until he was on the verge of dozing. He stiffened at the movement behind him.

'Did I disturb you?' asked Sugg, joining him.

'No, not at all,' said Chalon, shrugging off the sleepiness. 'I was admiring the country.'

'Magnificent, isn't it? Do you wonder I stay? Who could really ask for more – except, of course, for the Stone Men to move on. Faint hope, I'm afraid. You can see one of their settlements from here. Over there, where the river twists. See the drift of smoke? That's a village. The main settlement is much further south. Thankfully, you'll be able to skirt it when you leave.'

'Any sign of the Whiteface?' asked Chalon, glancing quickly to where the vixen slept.

'He's still in the area,' said Sugg. 'A little to your left, beyond the trees. There's an outcrop of gorse. He's somewhere in there. Still watching, still waiting.'

'He must know we're here.'

'Very obviously. It's my guess he saw something of the hunt. He almost certainly saw you head for this mound – and he hasn't seen you leave, so he waits. But not for long.'

Chalon shifted uncomfortably. 'I must seek him out.'

'We must seek him out,' said Sugg, sharply. 'You're not really in any fit state to tackle him alone. No disrespect, my friend, but he is very much younger, and your journey has taken its toll. You need a helping hand. Better that we should, shall we say, join forces against him and see him off once and for all. And now is as good a time as any. I collected food while you slept, so let's eat and then be on our way.'

'What about the vixen?' asked Chalon. 'I don't like leaving her.'

'She will sleep long and deep,' said Sugg. 'If we're quiet, she will not even know we have gone – and if we're quick that we ever went. Come, join me in food, and then we'll hunt!'

Chalon shivered again in spite of the sun's warmth.

They left the cavern by an opening Chalon had not noticed until Sugg led him to it. The fissure – just wide enough for their bodies to slip through – lay in deep shadow in a far corner and was obviously the wild cat's day-to-day entrance, thought Chalon, padding after him along a gentle incline. The floor here was dry, dusty in parts, and there was no difficulty in securing a grip. There were smaller openings to left and right, some leading into what Chalon knew to be deeper, darker caverns where Sugg might on occasions retire to sleep. Other openings led into higher passages, all part of the vast labyrinth of the rock mound, a veritable warren of dens and hideaways. But for the moment they moved directly ahead, Sugg keeping up a steady stream of conversation as they went.

'Pity you won't have time to see the place properly,' he

was saying, as they turned and began to descend. 'Of course, it would take ages. The place is really very large. You perhaps won't believe it, but there are some parts I haven't even seen myself! Every Season I promise I'll organise myself and really make the effort to explore, but I never do. I'm naturally lazy! Point is, I'm the only one who knows about the mound, and I want to keep it that way. Mind yourself here, we're crossing some loose rock.'

The slope sharpened, turned and meandered like a stream bed.

'We'll be in the open soon,' said Sugg. 'You'll see the outcrop of gorse, but I doubt if the Whiteface will spot us. Just follow me and I'll show you what I have in mind.'

They turned again, this time into a much wider passage where the sunlight was already trickling into view. Sugg quickened his pace, reached another turn and waited for Chalon to join him.

'We'll split up once we're in the open,' he said, quietly. 'You move off to the right, I'll take the left and wait for you to flush the Whiteface out. I think he'll move fast enough once he sees you.'

'But I really can't expect you to fight,' said Chalon.

'Nonsense! I may be old, but I'm not beyond doing battle when the cause is worthy. No, my friend, I'll take on my share of the fight, and gladly. The important thing is to get the Whiteface into view. We can't do much while he's still in the gorse.'

'If you're sure . . . ' began Chalon.

'Quite sure. Now, let's get to work.'

They left the mound in silence, slipping like two stray shadows into the cover of rocks without another word, almost soundlessly as their paws padded lightly over a shelving of stones.

Chalon's body moved instinctively lower, his ears primed, eyes flashing, and suddenly the stiffness in his limbs was forgotten. The hunt filled him even though he

knew the fight to come would be long, hard and perhaps . . . He dismissed his thoughts and fears and concentrated.

The rock cover ran straight and smooth and he was able to move without the need to be unduly cautious. Soon he would collect the Whiteface's scent. He paused, peered through a break in the rocks and levelled his gaze on the gorse. There was no movement, neither hint nor sound of fox. If the Whiteface slept, then his sleep was deep; the sleep of the exhausted. That might be an advantage, thought Chalon, and moved on. He eased himself lower as he slipped through a clutter of dead tree branches, then began to turn, sweeping round in a half-circle to face the gorse. The sun would be at his back; another advantage. The wind, though light and thin in the still frosty crease of winter's air, blew onto him, lifting a collection of scents, some of decay, some of the frost itself, some . . . He caught it! Whiteface!

Chalon stopped, his left forepaw only a whisker from the ground. His eyes widened. Now there was a movement, the softest nod of the gorse heads as something moved beneath them. He lifted his gaze in time to catch the last of Sugg's shadow slipping between rocks on the far side of the outcrop. They were perfectly situated for the drive.

Chalon eased forward, one step, a second, third. He halted, waited. Again the gorse heads moved. He took a fourth step, beginning now to move from the cover into an open area of stone and shingle. It would be there, in what already began to look and feel like an arena, that he would meet the Whiteface. But there was no hurry, decided Chalon. The first move must come from the Whiteface. He must leave the gorse. Chalon lifted his gaze again, but there was no sign of Sugg. He was buried deep in the rocks, watching, waiting, ready to spring when the opportunity and need arose.

Chalon slid on. The gorse moved again, this time more

hurriedly, with a new urgency, and Chalon was sure he caught the first sight of a flash of white coat. So be it – the Whiteface had spotted him and was ready. He would wait until the very last moment before making his move for the open, hoping to catch Chalon off his guard. But Chalon, his fur bristling, claws beginning to tingle, mouth filling with the slow saliva of anticipation, was ready – as ready, he thought, as he would ever be for what might well be his last fight. There would never be another morning quite like this, no matter how many still awaited him; never another morning when he would truly feel in the deepest thud of his heart that there really was something, and perhaps someone, worth fighting for . . .

The Whiteface lunged like a sudden whirl of snow; a white, leaping, fanged streak of fur, claws and wild eyes, a low growl rumbling deep in his throat.

Chalon crouched, his belly flat to the cold stone of the ground, his jaws already open, then slid quickly to his left so that the Whiteface crashed to his side and was forced to spin round. The momentum of the leap unsteadied him, toppling his balance. Chalon struck, his teeth snapping and settling into the Whiteface's left foreleg. He sank his teeth deeper, heard the high cry of pain, and let go, backing and tensing for his own leap at the Whiteface's throat. It had to be the throat; there was no other way he could kill and kill quickly. To fight on for too long would be disastrous. Now!

But the leap was mis-timed and too low. The Whiteface had only to lean away to his right for Chalon to miss and slither to a heap at his feet. The Whiteface snarled, bared his teeth and flashed a single, defiant glare of triumph. Chalon stiffened, waiting for the Whiteface to lunge. If he could slither away at the last moment, in the instant before teeth found a hold . . .

But the lunge never came, for the Whiteface backed suddenly as though caught in some ghost-driven shudder of

wind. There was a hiss, a fiery spitting, then a huge, darkening shadow as Sugg leapt from the rocks above them and fell, claws like manacles, on the Whiteface's back. There would have been an end then and there for the Whiteface had not Sugg's hindlegs failed to take a grip on the fox's flesh. The Whiteface cringed, whirled and shuddered, and in the heave of his flanks sent Sugg spinning across the ground to crash violently into the jagged face of a rock. The cat's eyes flashed, his jaw quivered, but the strength to fight on was buried in pain. He simply lay there, a limp paw thrashing on the empty air, his teeth chattering in a frenzy of hate and despair.

Chalon struggled to all-fours and made his lunge, this time catching the Whiteface on the neck. Again his teeth sank, biting deep into flesh, a torrent of blood cascading over his face. He held on for his life. The Whiteface thrashed to left and right, kicked and spun, twisting Chalon in all directions, crashing his body to the ground, scraping it across stone and rock, teasing at it in the effort to be free. But Chalon refused to let go. He writhed, whirled, his eyes blurred, limbs and jaw burning. One last bite; one final crush of teeth and that would be it. He tensed for a deeper hold, gathered his strength and closed his jaws in the tightest, deadliest grip he could muster . . .

'No!' called the voice above them. 'No death!'

The Whiteface crashed to the ground. Chalon's locked jaws opened and he slithered away from the fox towards the gorse. He gained his feet and stared upwards, high into the clear morning air to the opening in the rock mound where the vixen stood like a sleek shape sculpted in ice.

The Whiteface glared at her, blood running freely from the wound in his neck. He snarled and made to turn to Chalon.

'There shall be no death!' called the vixen again, her voice echoing through the rocks. 'No one shall die.'

Sugg tottered to all-fours.

Chalon shivered.

The Whiteface stared, still bleeding.

'You will go from here, Whiteface,' said the vixen. 'You will return to the High Peaks, find our kind and tell of what you have seen, of where we have reached, and that we are going on. You will tell of those who have helped and given their lives, of the paths we have followed. You will tell them that there is a south, that it lives, and that The Singing Tree is real – for all of us.' She paused and stared. 'You will go now, and may the fullness of the moon go with you.'

The Whiteface hesitated, panting, trembling, one paw flexing slowly in the pool of blood at his feet, but he did not answer. He stared again at Chalon, at the wild cat, then at the vixen for the last time before moving slowly, painfully from the glare of the sun to the shadow of the rocks, and turning north.

Eighteen

They stayed silent for most of the morning, watching the sun climb above the mountains and then, as noon came and went and the blue sky whitened in the east, begin to slip away like a softly shaded eye. Sugg slept, stirring only occasionally to ease his back into a more comfortable position and deaden the pain. Chalon lay sprawled on the cavern floor, exhausted but only half-asleep, one eye following the vixen's slow padding backwards and forwards from the edge of the opening to the shadows.

She had not spoken since Chalon and Sugg had returned from the rocks. She had watched them tend their wounds, wash themselves, feed without real interest, and then doze fitfully, in one moment swamped by an almost overpowering need to sleep, in the next jolted into sudden wakefulness by a stab of pain. But she wanted to talk, thought Chalon, watching her cross to the opening once again, needed to, for she was deeply troubled and now, as the day wore on, increasingly fretful.

Did she regret what she had done, or did she not understand why she had called out from the mound? Had it been in her heart to let the Whiteface go because he was one of her own kind, or was there a deeper reason, one she could not fathom even for herself?

'Are you disappointed?' he asked, lifting his head.

She turned to him. 'Disappointed? Why should I be disappointed?'

'Do you wish now that we had killed the Whiteface?'

'No, I do not wish that. There has been enough killing.'

'But the Whiteface intended death,' said Chalon. 'If he had thrown me clear, he would have killed. It was in his heart.'

'I know,' said the vixen, and stared into the landscape. 'It had always been in his heart. He did not want me to reach the south. To do so will mean an end to his way of life – to the Whiteface reign of terror in the High Peaks, to their fighting, hunting, their whole existence.'

'And now? What now?'

'He will return to the pack.'

'To tell them of what he has seen?'

'I hope so,' said the vixen. 'To make them understand that their coats are not a cage, that they do not have to live in them like prisoners; that there is another way – this way.'

'And will he believe it?' asked Chalon.

'Do you think he will?'

'Perhaps. I believe he will journey to the High Peaks, or to wherever the Whitefaces have fled. I believe he will try to reach them, and once there, who knows? Perhaps he will tell them of what happened here this morning. If that is heard, then . . . '

'It will be heard,' interrupted Sugg, one eye opening. 'Forgive me, I was not asleep. I could not help listening.' He struggled to a sitting position and yawned. 'It will be heard because I shall make sure it is heard. The word will be passed on.'

'Is that wise?' asked the vixen. 'What I did was simply of my own doing, to put an end to the deaths.'

'Precisely,' said Sugg, 'and in doing so you did enough. Whatever may have been said of the south and The Singing Tree in the past, whoever may or may not have believed, or wondered, or mocked, this much can be said: you at least fought for them and showed your belief in sparing the

Whiteface's life. Oh, we would have killed him eventually, make no mistake. He would have tired in the end. We would have found the strength to fight on. But in dying, what would have been proved? The victory would have been ours. Only the south would have lost, and that is not as it was intended by our elders.'

'Then what I did was right?' said the vixen.

'I hope so, but it will be many Seasons before we know. Perhaps one day there will be Whitefaces passing this way on their journey south.'

'Or perhaps the one I let go will change his heart and return to track us again,' said the vixen.

'No, replied Sugg, 'that will not happen. He will not turn back. You have created his destiny, whether he knows it or not.'

The vixen rose to all-fours. 'I feel better,' she said. 'I thought you might have doubted, or been angry.'

'Doubt . . . anger . . . ' said Sugg. 'We were doing what we thought was right, what is instinctive within us. We are hunters, all of us. Our stealth and speed and courage are our means of survival. It is as natural as sleeping and waking. We did nothing wrong, but what you did was infinitely right. But tell me - I must ask - what brought you from the cavern? Did you hear us fighting, or see us?'

'I just knew,' said the vixen.

'In your sleep?' asked Sugg.

'In my dreams,' said the vixen. She turned from them. 'And now you must rest. I will collect the food.'

They watched her leave the cavern and waited until they could see her on the rocks below before speaking again.

'In her dreams . . . ' mused Sugg. 'That is interesting.'

'I think she has many,' said Chalon.

'Yes, my friend, I am sure you are right, and they will serve you well, mark my word.'

But Chalon did not answer. He was following the vixen's

steady lope between the rocks, never letting her from his sight.

A month of moons passed before the last of the snow melted and the air turned warmer. The sun began to climb higher in the sky; the days seemed longer, richer in the scents they lifted, and new life began to show in the stragglings of growth. The gorse brightened; the lean runs of hedgerow began to bud and patches of grass, mosses and weed stand upright and firm. Winter was being shrugged off like the dust of old cob-webs, thought Chalon, as he lay at the vixen's side on a rock slab below the mound.

Their days since the fight with the Whiteface had followed much the same pattern: an early hunt for food, feeding, sleeping, resting, restoring their strength, feeling the flesh thicken on their bellies and flanks, sensing a keener awareness and, with each day, turning their thoughts still closer to the time when they must leave and head for the lake.

'You must take life as easily as possible,' Sugg had said. 'There's no hurry, at least not until the snows have gone. Then we can make plans. The cavern is yours. Make yourselves at home.'

And so they had, relishing the safety, growing warmth and, not least, the long nights when they sat and talked, watching the moon and listening to the sounds of the shifting Season.

Chalon's strength had grown steadily until each new morning had brought a brisker pace to his trot, a finer edge to his instincts and skills. The shivering in his flank was less frequent and the blurred vision began to sharpen. He was conscious of growing age, but there was no weakening of the will to think of what lay ahead and of how he might face it. True, his stamina, the sheer ability to keep going and not feel the agony of effort, was so much thinner, like a

stream trickling to an end, but in the hours when he felt at his best he was as strong and keen as ever. And when, as on this morning, the sun streamed across his back, the strength flowed, almost bubbling in his blood.

He opened his eyes and gazed at the vixen. She too had grown stronger. The leanness in her flanks had disappeared; her coat shone as though dusted with the purity of a gentle snowfall, and her eyes when they gazed into the land were brighter, yet blacker, seeing far beyond his own, beyond even the horizon and the south. But she had not spoken of the journey for many days. She listened carefully when Sugg spoke of the lake and the river they must cross in the search for the stag, Valdar, but there were no questions prompting him to be more specific. She seemed content within thoughts that were distant, perhaps even remote, thought Chalon. And then, when the sun was at its highest, she would lead him to the rock slab and urge that he rested. They would sleep, doze, wake, gaze at each other, but stay silent, waiting for some inner voice to summon them, to say: 'Now you must begin again. Now you must leave.'

The vixen stirred at his side and nuzzled at his head. 'Have you slept?' she asked, quietly.

'For too long,' said Chalon, stretching until his legs were straight and stiff.

'Then we should return to the cavern,' said the vixen.

They came to all-fours, slid from the slab and padded easily over the stones between the rocks.

The vixen went ahead, her steps as light as the air itself, so that hardly a pebble moved under her weight. She reached a deeper shadow cast from a bulge of rocks and halted, urging Chalon to her side.

'What is it?' he asked, sensing that she might have collected a new scent, caught a different sound.

She gazed at him, closed on his flanks and nuzzled his neck.

Chalon did not move. His thoughts moved from the mound, the stones and high mountain peaks, back to a Season long ago when he had run with the vixen, Lamlett, and reached the spinney where the long brook bounced and she had waited for him in the shadows of the tall trees . . .

'It is time,' said the Whiteface, softly, closing deeper on his flanks, her eyes glinting with excitement.

Then she slid from him to the darkest depth of the shadow, and waited. Chalon followed, his heart alive, reached her and covered her with a body that throbbed with the warmth of the new Season.

In three nights the moon had waned to a softness that left the mountains smudged and grey on the deeper, blacker sky, but the stars were brighter, it seemed, so that the land below the mound lay among silver dust.

Chalon, Sugg and the vixen had finished their meal and were seated at the cavern opening, intermittently washing, staring, resting, their stomachs full, their bodies relaxed and warm. The vixen sat close to Chalon, closer than she had been since the start of their journey, her coat light and gentle against his flank, barely touching yet close enough for him to always feel her there. Sometimes, when Sugg's eyes closed in a doze, she would nuzzle Chalon's jowl and lay a paw across his, but did not speak.

There had been no need for words since their coming together in the shadow; both knew and still felt their unity. They were at one, in mind, spirit, body, cause and, Chalon had since reflected, their future. There would be other mouths to feed at the turn of the Season – but, more importantly, *his* vixen to lead to the south. He had glowed in the thought, for now there was meaning to his effort in the journey. He had reached the outcrop and the crater on that night not simply to rescue the vixen, help her and support her in her quest, but to be at one with her. That too had

been foretold, he was sure.

Sugg stretched and widened his eyes.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'I think tomorrow is the time. The Season is fair, the nights dark enough for safe travel – yes, tomorrow. Do you agree, my friends?'

'You are right,' said the vixen. 'We are ready.'

'Good. I will lead you as far as the lake. Once there, you will travel around it – on its western side, I suggest, where the Stone Men tend not to hunt – until you reach the river. You must follow the flow south to the mountains. It is then that you will find Valdar.'

'He will be waiting?' asked Chalon.

'He will be there, rest assured.'

'And what of you?' said the vixen. 'You have been so kind, so brave, will you not consider travelling with us? Could you not leave the mound?'

'It is generous of you to offer a place at your side, but no, I think not. I could not leave, not now. I am far too old and far too much a creature of my own habits. The mound is my world, one I know and understand, and respect. We are like friends, having met by chance and grown, how shall I put it, grown old together, though I suspect the mound will long outlive me! But, in any case, there is work to be done.'

'Work?' said the vixen.

'Of a most important nature,' said Sugg. 'I must be ready to help others to the south, help in the same way that Ghek, Maychep, Briggan and the mice and squirrels have done. From what you have told me, without their aid you could not have reached this far – and now, there will be others, I am sure of that. Briggan led you to the circle of stones; you completed it – and thus, my friends, the south lives. But in reaching it there must be those ready to help. Nothing is achieved, however great the effort, without a paw to guide and serve in the cause. That is to be my role – and I welcome it.'

'And we shall not meet again?' said Chalon.

'Not in this world, but who knows what may lie beyond it?'

'Yet there is no one here,' said the vixen. 'You are always alone.'

'Ah, but that is half the pleasure, my friend. Most of my kind died in the Great Death and what few of my family survived were soon forced to make their own ways. I travelled south and reached the mound, much as you did, under the threat of hunters. And so it was here that I made my home. There have been no others of my kind pass this way since that day, and I doubt if any ever will. That is a situation I accept. It is not loneliness, for I know what I am and live happily enough with it.'

'But there may come a day,' began Chalon, 'sometime in the future, when . . .'

'Leave that to *The Singing Tree*,' said Sugg.

Chalon fell silent, unable to fathom Sugg's answer, but the cat offered no explanation.

'We must sleep,' said the vixen, and padded into the cavern's darkness.

'As you say – sleep,' said Sugg, and yawned.

Chalon waited until they had closed their eyes, then gazed into the stars again, and dreamed.

The sun was high, the air balmy in the new warmth, the land almost trembling in the prospect of growth, and the morning as vital as any Chalon could recall. They had left the mound early, long before dawn, and moved rapidly from the rocks, across open country to the first of the old pasture lands of the dale. There the freshness had sparkled on the stretches of grass, and the dusty track beneath their paws been damp enough to give it a lift, making their steps so much lighter.

Sugg led without a word. His pace was quick, assured, skilful in the direction it followed, always well away from the Stone Men's settlements, constantly skirting and shift-

ing out of their reach, so that even the soft breeze would not carry a scent to them.

They headed westwards across the dale, through a long, rambling spinney where, for all its stumps of dead trees, there was the occasional hint of green and growth. Soon they had reached a brook, crossed it and turned sharply south, this time hugging the overgrown sprawl of a hedge-row. Now the pasture began to thicken. There was more grass, the winking shyness of flowers and sometimes a distant tree already in full bud and beginning to break. There were new scents, fresher, keener – of rabbits, hares, mice and, Chalon was almost sure, of hedgehog, a scent he had not collected in many Seasons. Perhaps he could already scent the south, he thought; perhaps this was where it began; perhaps they were on the very brink of it. The vixen felt it too as she moved at his side without a murmur, only the flash of her eyes signalling her happiness.

They topped a roll of the land and began the slower descent to a thicker line of trees ahead of them.

'Beyond the trees is the lake,' said Sugg, turning to them. 'And this, I think, is as far as I go.'

They stopped and gazed into the distance to where the mountain ranges rose and flattened on the sky like vast bruises.

'Your path is clear, my friends, and I wish you well.'

'We thank you again,' said the vixen. 'We shall not forget.'

Sugg's eyes brightened. 'Nor I,' he said, then gazed again at the mountains. 'If I were ten Seasons younger. . . ' he murmured, but left the thought unsaid.

He lowered his gaze and slid away, as silent as the breeze.

Chalon and the vixen waited, watching him go, certain for a moment that he would stop, turn and come back to them. But soon there was neither scent nor sound of him, and they padded on, down to the lake.

Nineteen

The day had finally lifted in a blaze of high sun and long, thick shadows by the time Chalon and the vixen reached the lake. They came carefully from the tree line, at first fearful of moving from the shade to the open stretch of sandy shoreline bathed in the sun's full glare. It did not seem wise, or safe, they thought, to step out boldly and present themselves for all the world to see – and yet neither could resist the sense of space and freedom in the seemingly endless expanse of water.

There was no more than a flicker of ripple to the sand; no sounds save the whispering lap, a bird somewhere in the distance, the easy breeze among the trees and through the grass. Here, if they had ever dreamed of a place where they might linger for a Season, was the almost perfect haunt; where the weather would be kind beneath the shelter of mountains, the hunting rich, the living without hindrance or fear. A dog fox might well lead his vixen to such a place, thought Chalon.

He was the first to pad from the shade, his steps light and tentative on the sand, his paws warm at the moment of contact. He nosed, collecting the scents of growth and the irresistible sweetness of inland water. The vixen followed, trotting behind him to the edge of the lake where the sand was darker, damp and delicately chilled. She shuddered excitedly, her paws dancing in the slow ripples. Chalon moved out until the water lapped at his chest, shook himself vigorously and felt the sting and vitality of the flow

sprinkle across and through his fur to his flesh. The vixen joined him, and together, like travellers from some ancient desert, they bathed until their bodies were tingling and icy.

It was the first time for many days that Chalon had truly felt refreshed, as though the water not only cleansed and brightened his coat, but washed away the last miseries of winter, the mud and dust, the stiffness of caverns, passages, dank woodlands and dark copses. And when they had done and were dripping, they padded along the shoreline to where a clump of sandstone rocks gave them shade against the fierce beat of the sun.

'We must follow the shore from here,' said Chalon.

'For how far, I wonder?' asked the vixen.

'Impossible to tell. The river must lie on the other side of the lake, out of sight from here. We may reach it by night-fall.'

The vixen nuzzled him. 'Let us hope for a safe run,' she said.

Chalon gazed across the water. There were no signs of life, no movements, no scents he could not understand or recognise; the place, if anything, was deserted. Almost too deserted, he thought, or was that simply his overworked sense of caution? They rested until the sun was at its highest and then moved back to the shadows of the tree line and continued westwards.

It was mid-afternoon when they stopped again, this time to feed and then to lie quietly in a patch of tall grass beneath the black bulk of a tree. The vixen dozed, her eyes half-closing in the balm of the air, the satisfaction of food, the almost mesmeric calm of the day and place. But Chalon stayed wide awake. He had been conscious for some time of a subtle change, something he could not yet define or even sense with any certainty. There were still no sounds to worry him, no comings or goings he could not interpret, but there was something.

He nosed and gazed around him. No, there was nothing of consequence. Nothing stirred . . . or did it? The breeze – yes, it was the breeze. It was stiffening; gathering like a deep heave, and it had a keener edge. A change of weather, he thought; perhaps they were moving into a storm; perhaps it would be safer to wait, to let whatever was on the air pass while they still had the safety and shelter of the trees. And yet to do so would waste time when it was the river they must reach and then seek shelter.

‘Shall we go on?’ asked the vixen.

Chalon hesitated for only a moment. ‘When you are ready,’ he said, and came to all-fours.

The sun slid away early and the mountain ranges cast a gloom of their own long before the onset of dusk. Chalon and the vixen had made good progress until, the trees behind them, a rockier stretch ahead, they began to close on the mountain escarpment. They were climbing, at first slowly, gently, along no more than a steady incline, then more sharply so that the lake slipped from them and they could look down on its surface. In another hour the trees were no more, the growth sparse and ragged, the track they followed tighter and beginning to filter away to a scramble of stones.

Chalon led, his eyes already stinging under the still stiffening breeze. Soon there would be a definite wind, rushing like a great cough from the high peaks. But by then, he hoped, they would be settled for the night. The track finally ended and they moved down to the lake again. Chalon watched the surface for a moment, certain now that it too had changed; that where there had been ripples, there were waves, some of them edged with a glinting whiteness; where the flow had seemed even, there were whirlpools and long, bubbling eddies. They must be nearing the river, he judged, almost at the point where it flowed into the lake.

He stopped, felt the vixen at his side, and lifted his ears to the air. The sounds were those of the coming nightfall; the flap of an anxious wing as a bird went to roost or an owl took flight; a slither of pebble where an animal headed for cover; the chatter of water where it ran between rocks on the shoreline – and then, higher and more distant, a slow moan which, as Chalon concentrated, grew to a roar. The river.

‘We are very close,’ said the vixen, quietly.

‘Very close,’ said Chalon.

‘Does the river always make that noise?’ she asked.

‘I’m not sure. Perhaps it sounds that way at night.’

But Chalon was sure, as certain as he would ever be that ahead of them lay a river in full flood, racing in a stampede of high water from the melting snows of the peaks.

And so it proved when they reached the river’s mouth and watched its flow pounding, froth-tipped and roaring in anger, through the gathering darkness of a steep-sided gorge. Chalon turned his face to the wind that ran ahead of the torrent like a scream and stared long and hard at the teeming wall of water.

‘It is frightening,’ said the vixen, beginning to shiver.

‘But we must cross it if we are to reach the mountains,’ said Chalon. ‘If we dare.’

‘Is there no other way? Could we try from the other side of the lake – perhaps work our way overland to the mountains?’

The vixen turned her back on the howl of the wind where it cleaved the shelter of rock and stared deeply into Chalon’s eyes.

They had sat in miserable cover since darkness fell, reluctant to leave the lake and the mouth of the river, uncertain of where to go, of what to do, finding it impossible to sleep, and now, as the coldness of night began to seep into their bones, fearful of venturing further than they could see.

'I do not think so,' said Chalon.

'But why?' persisted the vixen. 'It may add a few days to the journey – three at the most – but at least . . .'

'Two reasons,' said Chalon. 'Firstly, we have no idea of what lies on the other side of the lake. The going could be difficult, there may be dangers we could not overcome. Second, the Stone Men. Sugg was quite specific in his suggestion that we keep to the western side of the lake, away from the hunters. We have done so and come this far without any encounter. It would be taking too great a risk to try to make a crossing elsewhere, only to find ourselves running to . . . to where? No, we must cross the river from this side.'

'But how?' asked the vixen. 'How are we going to so much as think of making a crossing with the river so high? We would not last a moment in that torrent. It would be instant death.'

'I agree,' said Chalon. 'But perhaps if we move up river, deeper into the gorge, we may find the flow gentler.'

'Faint hope,' said the vixen, sullenly. She padded impatiently through a half-circle and turned her nose to the wind again. 'Surely we have not come this far, risked all that we have, only to find . . .'

'You fret too much,' said Chalon, coming to her side and nuzzling her neck. 'I understand how you feel, but it is wiser to stay with the safety we have than chance our fortune on a new route. We must move up river – at first light – and trust that we find a crossing. There will be one, I'm sure.'

The vixen leaned on him, her warm breath caressing his face. 'You are probably right,' she said. 'It is just that we are so close. I can *feel* the south. I know Valdar will be there. It all seems so pointless to have to wait, to be so unlucky when we are so near.'

'Not unlucky,' said Chalon. 'It is our path.'

She nuzzled again. 'Then you do not doubt? You believe

in the south, The Singing Tree, that we shall reach them?’

‘We shall reach them,’ said Chalon.

They sat in silence, their eyes searching the night, their ears filled with the roar of the river, their bodies tense with impatience, but warm in their closeness.



They dozed through the long hours until the first hint of light in the eastern skies. Chalon's eyes had never left the river, watching every crash and dash of the cascade, his stare taking in every contour of those areas of the banks he could see, his mind working desperately to fathom a way of making the crossing. But where, and how?

Given a reasonable flow, they would have been able to swim across without difficulty, perhaps have the time to seek out the shallows and cross with no more than wet paws, but this – this tumbling, heaving mass of water – was a challenge beyond his wildest imagining. To move up river was their only hope, and yet even that seemed forlorn,

for the chances were that the flow would be faster, the gorge deeper.

He had thought they might try swimming the lake, but dismissed the possibility almost instantly. They had neither the stamina nor the skill for such an effort. No, there was still only one course – to travel on. Failing that, they could wait until the flow eased and the level dropped, but that might take weeks and the risk of being discovered, scented out by the hunters and their dogs, would increase with each day.

He stood upright, shook himself and turned to the vixen. 'We must go,' he said, and padded from the shelter into the whip of the wind.

They had little or no track to follow and were forced to fathom every footfall across the rocky levels of the bank. In the first hour, they climbed, moving higher until the gorge was like a frothing fissure far below them. In the second, they began to descend, closing on the flow until its wind-whipped spray crashed over them. Then the bank was more even along a shelving of loose stones and gravel where their paws slithered and slipped as though crossing an ice-pack. The wind continued to surge and roar until it seemed it would cut their legs from beneath them. And always they were in the darkness of the mountain range where, even as the first wink of dawn broke through the cloud, the light did not reach.

Chalon halted in the shelter of a rock wall.

'We have done well,' he said. 'The journey is difficult, but we are making progress.'

'But to where?' said the vixen, her gaze moving along the mountain range. 'We are no nearer a crossing than when we began. If anything . . .'

'Be patient,' urged Chalon. 'Save your strength for when it is needed.'

They moved on again, leaving the stones behind and finding themselves on a narrower, tighter ledge above a

sheer drop to the river.

'Take your time here,' said Chalon. 'Keep in my steps.'

He inched along the ledge, his paws feeling for each hold, gripping when he sensed safety, lifting where the surface seemed loose or too damp. He slid lower, his belly brushing the ground, to slip beneath a jagged protrusion of rock and was struggling upright again when a howling gust of wind struck them from behind like an invisible landfall.

Chalon was thrust forward and only succeeded in saving himself from toppling with the strength of his forepaws gripping and stiffening on the rock.

But the gust caught the vixen off-balance. She tottered, her hindlegs sliding to the edge of the ledge, then scrambled for a hold, failed to find a grip, and fell.

The wind carried her out from the ledge and into mid-air to send her spinning like a dead leaf into the torrent. Her white coat was lost in the froth of the flow, and the last Chalon saw of her before losing his own grip was her mouth ripped wide by the wind in a long, whining moan and the flash of her black, staring eyes.

. . . deep summer days, high sun and warmth . . . the run of the pack . . . the warmth of Lamlett . . . the winter closeness of the den . . . the grey dog fox, Wasden . . . the rats, Maychep . . . Briggan, the sett . . . Alom, the girl with the stunted foot . . . Sugg, the shadows of the cavern . . .

The thoughts and images teemed before Chalon like a dance of dreams, flitting silently but vividly across his mind, so that even the lash of the wind and the falling weight of his body were not real. He might simply be in anxious sleep and, when some sound far beyond him came to life, be as awake as ever as though nothing of the river and the gorge had been true, merely the wandering of his imagination . . .

He hit the torrent like a stone, the thud, the sting of the cold, the sudden closeness of the flow's roar, the speed and thrust of the rush, pummelling the breath from him as though he had been kicked. He sank, legs flaying, head twisting, body writhing, until it seemed he would dive to the very bed of the river; then rose, almost bouncing to the frothing, heaving surface.

The world was grey, white-flecked, black, green and shadowy, and choking. Water rushed at his throat, strangled him, tormented him, paralysed his limbs, fixed his eyes in a stare that saw nothing, realised everything. This was his moment of death. It closed like a hand reaching for him; touched him with the tips of the iciest fingers; prodded, then settled on him with a lightness that was almost comforting. Death, so passionately gentle, so vividly alive!

He felt the torrent carry him on, lifting him, pushing him beyond the surface, then dragging him remorselessly back into the cold and darkness. Up again – and there was the light, the sight of the rocks, the gorge, the swinging stampede of flotsam, the mountain range, near and far in the same glimpse. And the roar, always the roar, of the wind, the torrent, the whine of the vixen.

She was lost, he knew that – lost and gone somewhere so close, yet so many Seasons distant.

He crashed into a rock, spun round it and felt himself dragged on. Now his head was above the surface. He was breathing, gasping for air. Somehow he floated as though the very fingers of death were pushing him skywards for a last look at his world. His legs worked frantically, screaming with the effort for a hold, fighting the emptiness and defiance of water. He could not swim; he could do nothing save give himself to the river. And so he did.

He forced his eyes to gaze at the sky, to see the morning mounting the high peaks of the mountains like an army of white light – and then there was nothing as the torrent

lifted him yet again, stretched his body beyond agony, and some blindness and the nights of a thousand Seasons still to come engulfed him.

It was a sound so deep on the wind he barely heard it; so light it had no real existence; so soft it floated and was only the thought of the listener. But it persisted. It came to Chalon again, higher now and keener, drifting and then settling; a sound in flight. He waited, conscious of one eye beginning to flicker, of still warm blood at the tip of his nose, and a foreleg he could feel if not yet move. The sound rose, beating off the wind like an urgent cry. It was a bird, perhaps a hawk, a harrier, climbing and circling, then winging down the wind until it skimmed his head.

His one good eye widened. Here were the grey rocks; there the lift and whirl of the torrent; there the sky and the sun, and then the bird, black and bold on the clouds. It continued to circle, urging him to watch and then, breathlessly at first, to move. Chalon's paw quivered. A leg moved; another. He could feel the beat of his body, the rhythm of his pulse as he came to life.

He raised his head, dragging his neck fur from the blood in which he had lain. He could see clearly now – the dash of the river not a yard from him where he lay on a scattering of rocks, the high, almost sheer wall of the gorge at his back, the mountains far to his left. He came to a sitting position, the pain in his shoulders and flanks tightening until it seemed he would snap.

He had been tossed here by the flow; thrown up like so much flotsam of the flood – but he had crossed the river, for facing him on the other side of the flow was the ledge from which he had fallen.

He had survived. But for what, he wondered, watching the bird climb again and hover on the wind?

Twenty

Chalon had no idea of how long he had been sprawled on the rocks, but it must have been for some hours, he thought, for now the sun was firm and warm, and the light so much brighter. He came wearily, painfully to all-fours, his instincts already sharpened for a sound, scent or sight of the vixen. But there was nothing; only the white heave of the torrent and the curl and cut of the wind. She had gone; drowned, dashed to death on the rocks. By now her body would be so much flesh and bone and lifeless fur, mangled to a hideous pulp downstream. He shivered, every muscle twitching and trembling, his eyes suddenly glazed, his vision blurred and unable to focus for more than a few seconds on his surroundings.

Gone. At first there was emptiness, the chilling, almost impartial void of loss. She would have died quickly, he told himself. Perhaps she had crashed her head on the rocks and known nothing of the grip of water. Perhaps there had been no more than moments of the reality of the fall, and then darkness. Or had she too experienced those fleeting visions of the past, of her trek, the dangers, the encounters, the dream? Had she finally hit the torrent with the south and The Singing Tree still in her heart, or had her last thought been of the young she carried who would die with her? He shivered again and took a step forward. She had come this close, to within only a few days of the meeting with Valdar and the climb over the mountains.

She had been within a breath of the truth of her visions. She had been chosen, but only to die.

He shook the water from his coat and turned his back on the flow. He had to leave this place, leave it forever and never set eyes on it again. It was a grave, cold and grey and death-ridden. He moved clumsily over the rocks, without any sense of direction or knowing where to turn. Now his emptiness began to tighten. He mourned the loss of the Whiteface, but she had taken a part of his own life with her. Instinct moved him forward, found a hold for his paws, carried him from the rocks to the steepness of the climb that would bring him to the bank, but there was no desire.

He would continue the journey, he resolved; continue for the vixen's sake and her belief. He would reach the south. That much he would do while he had the breath to live.

Later, when the sun was higher and Chalon had reached the shade of a patch of trees, he lay exhausted and slept, but he did not dream. The sleep was deep but never anxious, as though his body might never move again and turn slowly, solemnly to stone.

It was dusk when he woke. The light was golden and the wind had eased. The roar of the torrent still filled his head, but now the evening air was calmer, warmer, and other sounds came to him. He washed himself, tended the wound at his neck and tried to control the shiver that had returned to his flank. His sight had cleared and shapes become recognizable, even though his eyes throbbed when he stared too intently or for too long. He would need to go carefully, he thought, to select his path as much for its ease as its speed. He would need to rest at the first hint of tiredness, to feed whenever he could, to take no chances and head as far south into the mountains as his legs would carry him. There would be no knowing when Valdar might

appear, if at all. He would simply have to trust that the path he chose was the right one.

South . . . He nosed the air, then padded from the trees and began to move down the stony side of a rocky valley. It was only then, when he was clear of the trees and could see the full stretch of the sky, that he noticed the bird he had first heard at the river was still with him. A harrier, high and hovering, almost waiting, it seemed, for him to be on his way. Did it watch him, he wondered, or was it merely curious? Perhaps it sensed a body for the picking if it had the patience to linger. Every picture told its tale, and in the land of survivors it was he who sensed the weakest who was first to eat and last to die. So be it, he thought. He could not blame the bird, for he too had tracked the lame and outwitted the blind. But the harrier would be disappointed. Chalon had no intention of being beaten now. He was heading south with the spirit of the vixen in his heart.

He paused at the thought of her. Should he have investigated the riverbank? What if she too had been thrown onto the rocks and still lived? What if . . . But the thoughts, he knew, were no more than wishful dreams. The vixen was dead.

He gave the harrier a last glance and went on his way, over the stones and into the gathering gloom of the valley.

The night was thin and cold, but the moon beamed in the black sky and the light was always bright as Chalon journeyed without stopping into the foothills of the mountains.

He travelled in a direct line, veering only to avoid the larger mounds of rock, find the shallows of a stream or, when he reached the steeper slopes of stone, to pad on firmer ground. He dismissed strange sounds and movements; there was no time to linger unless he sensed

immediate danger. The challenge was to reach the lower stretches of the peaks by dawn, a formidable target after his ordeal at the river and racked as he was by pain and shivering, but not impossible.

The faster he moved, the more purposeful his pace, the happier he became. He was at least moving, alive and coming ever closer to the south. Now it was a matter of stamina, he decided, of the sheer drive of his will and determination not to be beaten. He might well have lost a reason for living, but not the hold, however tenuous, on life itself. The vixen would not have wished him to accept defeat and turn back or live out his last Seasons in a land he neither knew nor cared for. She would have wanted . . . Again he dismissed the thoughts and settled his concentration on the path ahead.

He reached a small outcrop of trees by a mountain stream and fed lightly on the scraps of growth he could find. The icy water sated his thirst; the soft sand of a tiny inlet comforted his paws and gave him somewhere to sit at ease. He waited, watching the stars, feeling his strength gather again, and then moved on. He began to climb, steadily and at his own pace, crossing narrow plateaux of rock, small rolls and hummocks of stone, an unexpected stretch of clear sand, a patch of tangled growth, the ghostly remains of a huddled family of pines, until, as the stars dimmed and the moon slid away, he was into the mountain range and beginning to feel its walls close in.

His problem now was to find some way of crossing the range. There was nothing to be gained by scrambling at the first hold he found and hoping that it would lead him over the peaks on an easy track. Nor could he hope for much fortune in selecting a track at random, for any one of a hundred might at first appear likely and safe, only to peter out or end at a face of solid rock. He would need to find a vantage point, he decided; somewhere high enough for him to see the wanderings of the tracks and then to try to

assess which of them would serve him best. But he would also need the dawn and light to see by. And so, in that hour of half-morning and lingering darkness, he waited in the shadows and rested, his limbs grateful for the chance to be still, his heart-beat slower, his blood warm, his hope renewed.

He might have dozed, or crept to the very edge of deep sleep, but he was certainly not dreaming the sound that woke him and set the fur bristling across his shoulders.

The harrier's call was loud and piercing, sleek as an echo honed to an edge. Chalon came instantly to life, his eyes searching the sky for a sight of the bird. The first light was still pale, feathered between bands of mist, but there was no mistaking the shape that drifted towards him on the air, then climbed, drifted on, wheeled and climbed again in an almost frenzied flight.

Chalon watched it, listening to the call, mystified as to why the harrier behaved so uncertainly, without apparent cause, as though caught somewhere between fear and excitement. He continued to watch, waiting for the swoop that would mean a kill, but the bird simply climbed and wheeled and called, and then, without warning, headed for Chalon, its wings beating frantically on the air, easing, gliding, dropping lower until the body, wings and draught of their passage over his head sang in Chalon's ears.

Chalon turned quickly. Did the bird mean to attack him? Had that been a trial swoop, measuring the distance and force needed for an attack? The harrier had climbed and wheeled again, but now it was hovering – and definitely calling to him. Was he to follow? Chalon padded thoughtfully through a circle, gazed at the bird again, then moved off to the south, his eyes scanning for the harrier's flight.

He followed, keeping the bird just ahead of him, turning when it turned, moving higher when it climbed. The light broke pink and glaring in the east, so that where there had been darkness only minutes before there were shadows

and their shapes. He was on a track, level, uncluttered, narrow; a track leading to the mountains, one he had not seen before but which, he was certain, the harrier had selected. Then someone, somewhere, knew he was coming. Chalon's pace quickened, assured and vital on the coldness of the rock, his body suddenly pulsating with the promise of . . . Of what, he wondered? Dare he believe that ahead of him there was an opening, a way into the high peaks?

He padded on, the bird still in his sight, its wings beating like the slow curl of a cloud. The climb grew steeper, the track narrower. Now the foothills and valley below him were so much smaller, the huddled outcrop of pines no more than twigs, the stream a twist in the sand and stone. He climbed on, rounded a turn on the track and, as the harrier wheeled and spiralled higher, saw the stag, bold and sentinel on a ridge just below the drift of the snowline.

Chalon whined excitedly, Valdar barked, and the sun rose like a fire to greet their echoes.

It was some minutes before Chalon was able to move, to so much as lift a paw or feel any sensation through his body. He stood motionless, brush stiff, ears erect, his gaze never leaving the stag.

It seemed impossible, beyond his powers of belief, that here, no more than yards ahead of him, was Valdar, the final and perhaps most important link in the passage south. Impossible that after all his encounters, the dangers, hazards, fears and deaths, it had actually come to be that he stood in the presence of the stag; that here on a mountain range, on a morning filled with the splendour of sunlight, the freshness of clean air, they had met. And yet so painfully ironic that it should be he, Chalon, the one who had stumbled almost by chance on the journey south, whom Valdar should greet. The vixen should be here; it was she

who should be full of joy in her triumph, the realisation of her dream; she who should . . .

But the thought died at the call of the harrier high above him. The bird swooped again to within a wing beat of Chalon, then rose in a farewell wheel and surge of air and drifted away into the peaks. Chalon turned his gaze back to Valdar and watched the stag paw at the ground, toss his head and bark in the signal to follow.

Chalon began to trot in his steps, keeping the same distance between them, never falling behind, never gaining. The stag had not spoken; there had been no word of welcome, nothing save the understanding that existed in silence between them. Valdar had been waiting for him and doubtless knew of the vixen's fate. The harrier had been his scout and the guide to bring Chalon to the track. It was enough that he had arrived and that now the south lay ahead.

The track over the range twisted, turned, climbed and fell, but there was no hesitation in Valdar's steps as he picked his way cleanly, surely over the rocks, leading Chalon higher and deeper into the world of grey stone, brooding shadows, caves and strangely sculpted outcrops from where a million faces seemed to leer.

They went on for an hour, still in silence, until the sun had risen high above them and washed the mountains with a fiery glow. Chalon began to wonder if they would pause at all, if only to sate their thirsts, or were they so close that beyond the next lift of rock, the outcrop he could see in the distance, they would begin to descend to the first fields of the south? He was anxious to quicken the pace, to hurry on, but continued to measure his trot, hold to the track and follow in Valdar's steps.

They had entered a tighter, deeper gorge of bulging rocks below sheer sides of the mountain that reached almost to the sky, lifting like daggers until their peaks

sparkled in the sunlight. Valdar came to a halt some yards ahead and turned.

'You have done well. You have done everything – and far more – asked of you, and soon you shall rest in the pastures and woodlands of the south.'

Chalon wanted to move closer, to tell of what had happened at the river; instead, he eased slowly to his haunches.

'Now you must wait,' said Valdar. 'I will go on ahead and then return to lead you on. Be patient, my friend, and let the sun warm you.'

The stag cantered away, sleek and dark, and disappeared beyond a ridge in a shimmering distance.

Chalon sat, at first tense and impatient, the sun hot on his back, then he began to relax. He was tired, his body ached, the shivering in his flank had grown stronger and more frequent, and sometimes, when his stare lingered, his blurred vision sent stars dancing before his eyes. He wanted at that moment to sleep, to slip to the ground in some shadow and begin to dream . . .

And so, he thought, he had, for there was the vixen, as white and lithe as ever, her black eyes sparkling, her paws as light as leaves over the stones, padding towards him, reaching him, nuzzling him, until . . .

'You are alive,' she said, through a soft, warm breath at his ear.

Chalon woke, his heart pounding and, in his struggle to all-fours, touched her, saw and felt her, here at his side. 'But how . . . ' he began. 'You were lost . . . at the river. The fall . . . '

'Like you I was thrown to the bank,' said the vixen, nuzzling again, 'but much farther downstream. Valdar found me and carried me here, then sent the harrier to search for you. He made me wait to recover and gain my strength. Last night he told me you were found and that he would bring you. And now, I can't believe . . . '

But neither said another word. Their bodies clung to each other until their breath and scents, flesh and limbs were as one, until fur had closed so tightly on fur that neither dared to move for fear of a second of parting.

They drew gently apart at the bark of Valdar from the ridge.

'Now we must follow,' said the vixen, and went ahead of Chalon.

They mounted the ridge together, side by side, their paws almost touching, and stared into the sweep of the land below them. It was green and growing, tree-filled and dreaming, a land where the lushness sparkled and peace beckoned. It was a land such as they had never seen.

'It is the south,' said the vixen.

Twenty-One

On a day at the close of the long summer Season – warm and soft on the lands of the south – Chalon went alone across the drift of the low pastures to the woodlands. It was the first time since their arrival that he had ventured and hunted without the vixen; the first time he had been content and assured that their den beneath the exposed roots of the beech at the knoll was as safe and hidden as instinct warned it should be.

Today, with the sun so high and the Season lazy, he was free to wander, to explore those areas he had seen only from the den. Today, he thought, padding through the long grass, was his, to discover and, as the mood took him, to relish. He would reach the trees in his own time, rest and sleep and, assuredly, dream.

Yes, he would dream, of that he was certain, for there was rarely a day or night passed without images and visions of the past flitting across his mind, when all that had been was suddenly and inexplicably far more important than all that was and might still be. It was the creeping thoughtfulness of age; the going back along paths and tracks that were so much easier, gentler than those which lay ahead. What had been, and what he knew, however precarious and misguided, had its own solace. It was always tomorrow that he fretted over. Or was that, he wondered, pausing to catch his breath, because tomorrow was infinitely distant and might never come? There was

the sun, the promise of a moon, but how frail the hope of dawn when sleep and dreams were everything . . .

And yet here was the grass, as fresh and lush as ever, the very heart of the south; there, beyond the woodland, the river, and beyond that the endless miles of growth. New life was beginning, had its hold here and would spread until the Great Death, the Burning Air were simply legend. Time had won – time and whatever spirit nurtured creation. It had been foretold, and he had been a part of it.

He paused again and sank to his haunches, his gaze scanning the green canopy of trees ahead of him. He would need to bring the vixen here, he thought, to let her see the deeper splendour of the south; to let her truly feel all that had been told by those who had greeted them since their arrival with Valdar.

What a day, he reflected! Distant now, but still teeming with the comings and goings of mice and hares, rabbits and otters, birds, shrews, voles . . . until it seemed the kingdom had descended upon them. And the noise! The wonderful, invigorating noise – the chatter and calls of a hundred voices, each as rich and pealing as bells. That had indeed been a day, one he had thought would never end in the feasting, greeting, talking, recalling, telling a million times it seemed of their journey, of those they had met, and of how at each step of the trek they had been helped.

‘Just as we always knew it would be,’ an elderly otter had said.

‘Just as it *had* to be,’ a rabbit had countered.

‘Nev – never a doubt,’ a shy shrew had stammered.

‘So be it,’ Valdar had said, and taken Chalon aside to the shade of a tree. ‘Now I can truly say welcome. This day will live long for all of us, and for you. But my time is limited. My place is in the mountains to await those who still travel, so I will say what I must. Find peace here; guard the Whiteface and keep her young close to your heart, and when you are ready, find The Singing Tree. It is here. It

waits. But do not ask its whereabouts.'

'Surely, I must,' Chalon had said. 'I have come this far, so has the vixen.'

'It is here,' Valdar had repeated. 'You will know where to seek it when the time is right.'

'But this is the south . . . *really* the south?' Chalon had asked.

'It is. Here the new world is beginning. Look around you, watch each new day, be glad of every night, for in their coming and going we move on. The land is living again. In a thousand Seasons from now the south will be a world complete.'

'And Men – are there Men?'

'Not yet. They will come, but theirs is another path, one they must find themselves. It will be slow, it will take time. Men will find their own way back – or not at all. They have their choice. For you it has been destiny.'

Destiny, reflected Chalon, his gaze still on the woodland. Destiny of meeting, journey, danger and, finally, delight in the birth of the Whiteface's four young. That too had been a memorable day, beginning in a misty dawn chilled with the anxiety of the vixen's preparation, her impatience, then fear until, in the late afternoon, the young had been there on the hay bed beneath the beech.

'See for yourself,' the vixen had said, when she had washed and dusk was edging over the knoll.

Chalon had padded softly into the darkness of the den to nose as delicately as a breath at the bodies huddled in a ball for warmth.

'There are no Whitefaces,' the vixen had said at his back. 'They are as you are.'

And when Chalon had turned to her, she had settled her dark eyes on him.

'I dreamed it would be so,' she said. 'It was foretold. I am the last of the mutants from the High Peaks. There will be

no more. You have proved that. It is a return and a beginning.'

And perhaps an end too, thought Chalon, his gaze deepening on the land, for now the young were growing, making their first forays as hunters, taught and guided by the vixen, and soon they would seek their own paths in the south. Theirs would be a country of peace and gentleness, of that he was sure. True, it would have its death, moments of vicious instinct, but it would be a land as it was meant to be, as it had been. For others – certainly himself – it would be a place of the last Season, memories and hope.

He rose to all-fours, and padded on, working his way slowly through the pasture, heading towards the woodland as though beckoned. His flank had started to shiver again, his eyes become more painful as he tried to focus. It might pass, he thought, or would it? Today was different; there was a closeness about it he had not sensed before, a silence such as he had felt in Briggan's sett when it had seemed he might reach out and touch it, and now, blurred though his vision was, a brightness that compelled and, in its shimmer, almost spoke.

He could hear Valdar speaking again, just as he had on the night of their arrival . . .

'There are some words passed to each of us when we reach the south,' he had said. 'No one is certain who composed them, or when, but you should listen to them and remember . . .

Light forever lingers here,
Sleeping as in stone,
And yet a world awakens here,
Shifting through its bone;
Who knows whose feet may tread
Where only dreams can see,
Who listens to the shadowed dead
And hears The Singing Tree?

Chalon had remembered and thought deeply of the words, for they spoke of *The Singing Tree*, the only reference ever made to it in the south. Strange, he thought, that it should be so . . . no more than words.

He turned left and made for the shadows at the fringe of the trees, his steps faltering under a new bout of shivering. Strange, too, that the vixen had not urged to come with him this morning. She had watched him go, tracing his every step from the knoll until he was out of sight. Her eyes had been softer, he thought, dark as ever but deeper, seeing far beyond him. Such was her own strangeness and magic, that indefinable presence that seemed even now to inspire and delight. He had never met a vixen quite like her, and there would be no other. The chosen came only once.



He reached the woodland and wandered into the trees. Here it was cooler, softer underfoot where the dampness still lingered. But there was no breeze, not a murmur across the leafy roof; no bird song, no echo of a turning brook.

And yet it was not a lonely place. There were others here, soundless, invisible beings, sleeping. He stopped and nosed, his eyes stinging. The scents were gentle and sweet, but did not drift, as though they had come to rest here and lay together between stones, beneath the twigs and folds of fallen leaves.

He went deeper until the shadows were behind him and he was into a clearing where the grass stood shoulder high and the sweep of a broad oak tree dappled the ground with a wash of grey shade. The place might almost be secret, he thought, coming to rest at the oak; a dreamer's place. He slid gently to the ground, his body stretching long and firm in the lushness of the grass. Here a dog fox might dream forever . . . of hunting, journeys, plains and mountains, of lands of old, friends and peace . . .

His eyes closed. Somewhere far above him a breeze murmured through the cloudless sky. He sensed it, listened to it, happy that it had come at last to hum among the leaves and lull him into final sleep.

And soon, he knew, the tree would sing.

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